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About Submissions

Currents welcomes submissions from all SLCC—Meramec students. Submissions are accepted the last four weeks of the Fall and Spring semesters. Submission guidelines are available from the English Department in Communications North. Currents is published annually in the Spring. Information about creative writing at Meramec can be found on the last page of this volume.

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Penn Boon

Noisy Basement

I discovered the night crickets that keep you awake. They are singing in the basement and are brown with a hard shell and serrated legs. I think they are a family because two large and two small huddle in a dry spot a few feet from the furnace. They have come inside to escape the rain. Outside, a barrage thunders down on their cricketed cousins, though to me the onslaught seems to be small droplets of water. I sit on top of the dryer listening to falling rain, waiting for you to finish heating my frozen dinner.
Penn Boon

Time to Dance

Mother says time dances
The same jig for everyone.
   But I find that hard to believe.
I’ve never seen the dance, but I can hear
Her shoes tap-tapping away night after night,
   Twirling around and around inside my clock.
The same steps over and over:
   Step step spin,
   Step step spin,
   Turn, spin.
With feet that never tire she dances on and on,
   A lonely partnerless cadence.
Tomorrow night I will join her for a song or two
   Instead of laying in bed listening to her dance in the dark.
Penn Boon

Fading Footprints

How did I get to this point? I try and run through the events of the last few hours in my head as I stare out the window. I keep getting distracted by the footprints leading off into the snow. Maybe I should follow her. No, she took the flashlight and it's starting to get dark. As I look around, I once again try to figure out just where the hell I am.

At four o'clock this evening, I had picked up my girlfriend from her apartment. As soon as I started driving, she started hounding me.

“Hey, where's the map?”
“What map?”
“Any map, you silly man!”

She has an amazing smile, which is probably one of the main reasons we stayed together as long as we did.

“Well, what would we need a map for?”
“So I can know where we are going.”
“But you do know where we are going.”
“I know we are going to your parents house in the country, but I don’t know where it is.”
“Well, you don’t need to know, because I’m driving. And I don’t need a map, cause I’ve been to my parents house a bunch of times.”
“But what if you get tired and I have to drive?”
“I won’t get tired, I just drank some coffee, and it’s only four hours away.”

“OK, but don’t come crying to me if you start getting sleepy.”
“Don’t worry, I won’t.” I didn’t mean to snap at her, but when she said sleepy she pronounced it sweepy and put on her pouty baby face. I hate it when girls pout, it drives me crazy. I hate it even more when they use baby talk; it reminds me of one of the pitfalls of unprotected sex.

She rolled her eyes and looked at the clock. “4:15, we should get there before 8:30, right?”

“Right, 8:30.” I answered through gritted teeth and stared hard at the road. I also hate it when people roll their eyes.

I wonder what time it is now. I look at the clock before I remember that the car is off. Well, it has been dark for a long time, but that doesn’t tell me much. Like I know what time it gets dark around here anyway. Once again my eyes look at the footsteps trailing off behind the car. Screw that, I’m not following her. I turn my head around and squinted. Maybe if I look hard enough, I can catch the glint of metal on moonlit snow. I wonder how far she can throw. Silence echoed through my car. It doesn’t matter. I don’t really need to know what time it is, do I? The silence echoed again, this time in my head.

“Give me a plural noun.”
I took one hand off the wheel to rub my eyes. “Honestly honey, don’t you
think that two hours of adlibs is enough?” As the seconds ticked on, I became afraid to take my eyes off the road to confront the scalding gaze I could feel searing my cheek.

“Well, maybe if someone would participate in a conversation, or act interested in what I have to say, ever, then I wouldn’t have to resort to childish games to get a single word out of you!!”

“Pants.”

“WHAT!!”

“Pants, it’s a plural noun.”

“Just forget it,” with that she opened her window. I looked at her as a cold blast hit me in the face, and watched as she threw the book out the window. “There, now are you happy?”

“I sure won’t be if we get pulled over for littering.”

“You are so difficult.”

With that, I was granted an unexpected, but not unwelcome intermission. Like most intermissions, it was over before I had figured out what exactly had happened during the first act.

“Hey, maybe we should stop for gas.”

I looked at the gas gauge; it read a quarter tank. I looked up at her just in time to see the gas station pass by behind her. She was staring at me, eyebrows raised. “We’ll be ok, I think there is another one in a few miles.”

There had not been a gas station in the next few miles. Which brings the car to its current position: In the snow, out of gas. I wonder if she’s OK. Again my eyes are drawn to the set of foot prints leading off behind me, then to the snow in front of me.

“You are out of your mind.”

“I’m sorry sweetheart, but that’s what happens when you draw straws, someone has to get the short one, and this time it was you.”

“You are the one who didn’t stop at the gas station!”

“How was I supposed to know that we would run out of gas before we got to the next station?”

“Well maybe if someone had brought a map we would have been able to figure it out.”

“Well either way, you drew the short straw, so you go get the gas.”

She looked at me with sullen eyes. I would have rather seen the burning intensity of the anger she had shown me earlier. “I sure did.”

She started to get out of the car but paused, and turned around to face me. “How’s this for a short straw?” In a single motion, she had snatched the keys out of the ignition, jumped outside, and slammed the door. She took three steps and stopped. As she turned again to face me, I realized that my previous preference to the burning intensity of her anger had been foolish naivete. I watched as she pulled back her arm and in a blur of speed created a golden arc through the moonlight. The keys were gone and, through the passenger window, I read a single word on her lips before she turned and walked away. “Asshole.”

That was five minutes ago, I haven’t moved. I really am an asshole aren’t
I? The cold seems to intensify and seep into my stomach, or maybe it seeps into my chest. I notice that new snow is falling on the set of footprints leading away behind the car, just as it falls and covers my keys already hidden in the shadows before me.

Fuck the keys. I don’t have any gas anyway. I get out of the car and zip up my jacket. I’d better run. I start to run. The footprints fade in front of me in the snow that continues to fall.

If I can’t find her, I will be lost in the woods by myself. As I round a bend, the footprints finally disappear, but I keep running.

“Hey!”

I stop and notice that I have run right past her as she sits quietly under a tree. I stop and walk back.

“You came looking for me, I’m amazed.”

“Look, I’m…” I’m panting, out of breath from running in the cold, or maybe the words just stick in my chest.

“You…?” Her eyebrows raise as she waits for me to finish.

“I’m sorry.”

She stands up and dusts the snow off of her legs. She stares at me for a second, and I am unsure of the emotion twitching her cheeks. I could bring up the point that she is just as nuts as me for throwing the keys, or that now, even if we could get gas, and get back to the car, we couldn’t go anywhere. But I don’t say anything else. Finally she smiles. “Come on, let’s find that gas station.”

Together we start walking again. I am lost, and I hope she knows where we are going. I look behind us and see the two sets of footprints we make, one set slightly bigger than the other, but both quickly being covered by freshly falling snow.
Cecilia Barresi

Mona Lisas on the J-Line

J. R. Lies somewhere
and listens to his solid floor’s brush bride’s slippers.

I am waiting for the morning people.
The spine of my travel book aches upon closing
a night
hunched over.
Prayer is an uncomfortable position
that murmurs farewell to curled-lip contortions
when the sun demands my presence.

Ohio makes a light
that bleaches and rains on dry fingers
imbrued by plans
that wait to walk upon the page again.
The book is the brail of badgered senses.

These pages smell
like salt water and
spilled cherry coke
sticky tables
cigarette smoke.
There are inkblot games in the corners,
finger-painted pictures stuck together,
and a photograph of Ace signed
Thanks for saving my life.
J. R. is lying somewhere and dry fingers have been scraping stories
of nights on the J-Line,
hands hooked to hapless conversations in a book,
minds play percussion.
The moon is like Di Vinci’s right eye.
His violinist play strings that stitch us to his portraits.
And then the painter leaves us there like Lisa
chiaroscuro on the Sunset track.

Bride’s slippers
slide on solid floors.
Dry fingers stick to the page we started on:
Staring out from sand bucket seats
Pencils trying to freeze up the sea in single strokes.
But the ocean is a know
too wet and heavy to untie,
and I am still wondering
what it means to be on land.
Michael Cobb

Coffee for a Dollar and a Headache

Sitting there in the poet’s loft, I was for intellectual intercourse. I found only the usual dark redundancies of grief and vampires.

Mother gothic, wiccan, new age death spills into my ears. Ballads of self pity and love and fear all wrapped up in fish net stockings.

My mind recoils in horror at what I hear. More of this and I will be forced to leave. The next poet approaches the stage dressed in black and sadness. She cries for everyone, Most importantly herself.
Michael Cobb

In Arkansas

Black dogs chained to dismal trailer parks  
Whine softly  
Throughout the legions of pine trees  
In Hempwallace.

The rotten wood of an outhouse  
Burns the fetid air.

The Bible shine over, the thick leather belt tightens  
On the land.  
I mourn as I walk down the road of a cornfield’s heart.

The minds of weathered artists are like decaying apples  
Sleeping under a bail of hay.

A farmer in the open field whips his horse  
And passes.
Kathleen E. Croker

The First Lady of Burma

Four walls, after 18 months, begin to transform into a pulsating circle.
I can hear the beat—beat pounding on the Studs.

I can smell the forgotten dust rise between the Drywall.

I crumble to the Floor like discarded laundry, but there is no one to pick me up.
Paul Drago

After pushing her comforter to the floor

for Molly

This cigarette burns down to the end
sucking in the taste of a burning filter.
You knew you didn’t have to ask twice.
I know the scars of your wrist
still bleed sometimes.
Do you still see him
sitting on the couch with the needle in his arm,
the rose of blood forming in his arm hairs?
Your heart may be a tumbler
filled with gin and ice.
I can feel the crisp wind blow.
You said, Lake Erie winds have frozen
everything inside and fortified your mind
from me. I could break past your lies.
Tell me, Molly, when you saved my life
Did you simply trade in his?

I sit quietly in a lonely St. Louis apartment
staring at my pack
of Pall Malls and a dirty pot of coffee
wishing I could be somewhere else—
in the cold winters of Ohio
with my head on your shoulder,
my hands entwined with your own.
a flower comforter carelessly pushed to the floor.

I light another cigarette—this time to you
for what cannot be.
But I promise not to tell.
Dominic Pisanello sat at the head of his kitchen table in pressed pants. “Dotty?” He turned to his wife of sixty years. “Can you take me to see my mother now?”

She’d been scrubbing dishes and stopped abruptly. She looked at him. She had not known him as a child, but the pleading in his eyes behind bifocals, which dented the bridge of his nose, let her imagine him with ghosts of playschool friends in 1925.

“Dom, why don’t I turn on the phonograph? We could use some exercise.” She laughed. “We can’t stop dancing in our old age. What’ll we do with ourselves?”

“But I won the match,” he begged. “In Florissant. We live in Florissant, Missouri. And I want to see my mother.”

Dot pursed her lips and squeezed her fingers through the rosary laced around her right hand. She shuffled in her leather flats to the pantry and pulled out a Christmas cookie tin. “Here, Dom,” she said opening the tin and shoving it onto his placemat. “Dom, have something to eat.” Inside lay a pile of baked banana raisin flower heaps that Dom baked up every week and swore kept him fit. Dot hadn’t seen him baking in a while, though, and neither of them knew how long this batch had been there.

“I have to sweep the porch,” he might have been saying to her, but he was already halfway out the door with his broom. She stood there gazing at his trail and reached for the phone.

She recalled an arbitrary number and dialed. “Hello? Who’s this? Franky! Well how you doin’? My youngest son…Yes, yes… Oh Frankie I don’t know. You know the Lord gave me a good disposition. I’ve always kept a smile on my face, but Dad, he’s…acting…” Her voice trailed off into a slow and mournful march of words, a story memorized by everyone younger than she was. “You know when your father and I got married, he said, ‘I am going to have a good marriage. I don’t want any problems.’” She lifted the curtain to look at Dom’s frame around which the red brick of the house gleamed. Fall was giving everything warm glows. “And we never did. You know someone for sixty years.” She heard a car door shut and lifted the curtain again. “Well, Junior’s here, Frankie. I’ll talk to you later. Bye.”

Outside Dom’s teeth appeared to greet his son. He held out his hand and Dominic Junior took it. They shook but his father wouldn’t let go. Dom gripped tight. They “grr”ed and shook.

“My name is Dominic Joseph Pisanello. I am at home with my son. This is where I belong.”

Junior laughed. “And I’m here to clean your gutters.”

Dom jumped to the porch to open the door for his son. “Dotty’s inside. I’m gonna finish up here.”

Junior walked into his childhood home and saw his mother peek around
the corner into the hallway.

“Dominic Junior!” she crooned. “I guess Dad’s still outside. Did you see him outside?”

They glimpsed out the front window to see Dom bobbing about outside the windows, sturdy limbs leading lady broom in a dance to the doorstep. The screen door swung open to a “du-dee-dee-da” in four-four time from his throat all the way to the broom closet.

“All these years,” Dot whispered. “He was such a good husband. Well, I say a rosary for him every day. You know, the couple who takes your father and I to church every Sunday, they’re having problems, financially. The husband, mm, mm, Mark, can’t find a job. So Wendy, that’s his wife’s name, had asked me to add them to my prayer list, so they could stay here in St. Louis. Come on in here, Junior.” She led him into the plastic covered den. “You know, I say a rosary for everyone in the family every day. It’s how I get my exercise, walking around the house praying for my family.”

“Mom, you should be more modest about your prayers.”

“Oh, so you’re telling me what to do now? I guess that’s what happens when you get old.”

“Say, don’t you and Dad use the old phonograph anymore?”

“Oh,” she made a worried shape with her lips. “Well, we start to, but Dad gets so distracted. Well, the rosary service is catching on at church now.” She sat down on the sofa with her son. “Look here at what I found.”

“Junior!” Dotty and Junior turned to the arched doorway into the living room. Dom was on his knees, revving up his arms for punching. “Hit me!” he “Dad, we’re getting too old to play this game,” Junior said.

“You’re getting old,” his father remarked.

“Oh, Dom,” Dot rang, “You are an eighty-five year old man!”

“Dotty, I’m a boxer. Come here Junior and wrestle me a little.”

Junior crawled onto his knees into the ring. Within a minute Dom had Junior’s arms twisted above behind his back and he lay face down on the floor. Dot jumped out of the sofa and began pacing around the living room.

“Oh, I can’t believe this,” she said to herself, and then out loud, “Now you two stop that! Junior you’ll give your father a stroke!”

“Look at this man, Mom. He’s in no danger, trust me,” Junior strenuously managed to say, and then rolled over while his father laughed.

“You know I was a boxer,” Dom told them, looking out the window.

“Yea,” Junior knew. “You were king of the yard.”

“I was king of every yard.” Dom looked at Dot on the couch.

“Dom,” she said, “Come sit here with me. I want to show you something. You too, Junior.”

They both obeyed. Dom took her hand and squeezed, knowing the
translucence of her white skin, through which you could see blue veins curling and flowing between wrinkles, housed a strength hidden by her frail venire. His feet were pasted to the floor and pointed straight forward. An album rested on Dot’s lap, but he looked at her face.

“We’ve been married for sixty years,” he said to her.

“Yes, Dom. We met on the dance floor.” She flipped the page to a picture of Dom and herself, Sylvie and Rita on their laps with white Easter hats and lacy socks. “Do you know who those girls are Dom?”

He glanced at the picture and then to the window.

“Those are your granddaughters, Dom. They’re Junior’s girls. Don’t you remember when they were that age?”

Dom’s eyes were only tracing the path of a robin outside, nest to branch and to the ground.

“And you know who that is, don’t you, Dom?” She pointed to another picture of a woman in a housedress, curly black hair holding her in her twenties.

“That’s you, Dotty.”

She smiled.

He pointed to another photo. “And that’s my mother.”

Dot seemed to lose her breath for a second. When it came back her voice was fragmenting the words, “Why, no! Dominic Joseph, that’s Bernice!”

“Take me to see my mother,” he said in a low, asking voice

“You remember Bernice. She was born in 1918 just like us. Remember how we along? She’s a real classy gal, grew up in the Great Depression just like us.”

“Let’s not give Dad a hard time, Mom,” Junior said as he bowed his head

He remembered suppers at the dinner table with his parents, his two younger brothers and baby sister. Every time his mother made chicken, his dad would say, “We had chickens all over the yard, and you could shoot‘em and watch‘em run around a little,” and the kids would laugh. In the past year the story kept going. As Dom’s lips shook, as though his mind was saying so many things his mouth couldn’t cooperate, he would say, “There was a bum, and he’d give a nickel to any one of us kids who’d shoot‘em,” and tears would leak through his shield of a white Sunday shirt and cufflinks.

“My mother is waiting for me.” He tried again.

“Oh, Dom!

“We live in Florissant.”

“There’s nothing there but a pile of rubbish!” Dot turned to her son. “We always had such a good marriage. The Lord gave me a good disposition, as He gave your father.

“I know, Mom,” Junior consoled her. “We never had any problems.”

“Junior! You get a head start!” Dom was laying on his back on the eggshell carpet, fists clenched. “Come on, give me one good pop!”

Junior stood up in front of his mother’s rebuttals from the sofa and
looked to the squinting peel of desperation in the shadow of Dom’s eyes’ playful glint.

“There ya go, son, sock me!”
“You really want it, don’t ya, Dad?”
Dom nearly squealed while squirming on the floor.
“Dom,” Dot begged, “I’ll put on some music! We’ll dance. You still like to dance, don’t you?”

Dom couldn’t hear her, as all he knew were the sound of the robins outside.

As Junior raised his arm to the degeneration of his father’s mind, sustained by a body that intended to live through it, Dot turned to the window and watched the robins flutter around the branches together.
Christopher P. Fisher

Mirrors

Two o’clock. It was time for my grandfather to start getting ready for work and time for us to shave. Well, I wasn’t really shaving. At five years old there really wasn’t a need for that, yet. But my grandfather would head to the bathroom and begin his shaving ritual and I would follow closely behind.

I pulled up my stool and then I took my place next to my grandpa at the sink. He had already begun whipping up our shaving crème. He never bought shaving crème at the store, always opting to make his own. “You get a closer shave this way,” he explained. He would then hand me my razor, minus the actual blade of course, and he would sharpen his own blade. Then we would both look into the mirror and begin shaving.

Each motion he made I would then repeat. Trying to memorize each stroke the reflection next to me in the mirror made. After we finished we would wash off the remaining residue and then apply our aftershave. His favorite was Old Spice, a brand that I would never use again after the age of 6 and never admit to having used after the age of 15. He kept a large bottle of it on a small table next to the basin. He also kept the countless extra bottles he received as gifts over the years piled up in cabinets under the sink.

This became our daily ritual for the next year I lived with him and my grandmother. I learned everything I needed to know in that small bathroom about life and where I came from. My mother would eventually get back on her feet and she would move my brothers and me to a town forty-five minutes away. The years would pass and I would start having to shave with a real razorblade. I never make my own shaving crème and I don’t wear old spice.

Even though the only job he ever had was the second shift at a factory on an assembly line (a job he would eventually work from the time he graduated high school until his retirement) he still would never think about leaving the house without shaving. Looking into the mirror to inspect his newly shaven face, a toothy smile would arise and he would then turn to me and say “Christopher, no matter what status a man has, there is no excuse to look like a pauper.” It would take me years to understand what he meant by that.
Corrie Jekel

We Dance to Benny Goodman

There—my dad is not weak and old—
he is strong, youthful. Smiling as
he holds me tightly, I barely breathe.
Large wire-framed glasses mask his
face. His shirt says Almost Paradise.
He is still healthy. Can breathe with his
lungs, can walk with his legs, can spin me
in his arms as we dance to Benny Goodman.

Standing behind him, I hold him just
as tightly. Grinning like a drunk
group leader at an AA meeting. We
are at a family dinner in front of the
piano he gave me for my birthday. Then,
I still played the music. Had someone
to watch Donnybrook with. My hair is
still worn in the same messy ponytail.
Elizabeth LaRue

This Is the Medicine I Prescribed

Slip your hand into a jar of words.  
Release your innards onto a page.  
They say this is very therapeutic.

Gave up the needles and pins, 
the devices that worked for me.  
Gave up the sadistic scarring, 
the visual I needed.  
Still biting my tongue for a bit of relief.  
I'm not sure if I feel anything if I can't express myself in blood.

I try more and more words on 
realizing they are too skinny, too fat, 
not modern and not stylish.  
I guess I am a complicated size.  
Maybe I am immune.
Ally McWilliams

Greeting Card Blues

I keep my dad in a greeting card
Stuffed in my left hand drawer,
A pretty pink card with dusty flowers
Spelling out
I love you.
You mean everything to me.
And a name at the bottom, printed
In thick black ink.

I keep it in the dark,
Stuffed carefully under a box of tampons,
So the childish ink-stain flowers
Fade away a bit.
But his name,
His thick black name, in permanent marker,
Stays with me, impossible to wash away.
He must have known I would forever
Be marked as his,
Bearing his seal,
A cow branded so it can never escape the farmer.
Laura Hazan

Cooking Like My Mother

No one eulogized my grandfather the day of his funeral. Not his son or daughter, not his seven grandchildren or nine great grandchildren, none of us. I could have done it, there was a long pause in the Mass and I was in the front pew and I thought, “Someone who really knows him should be getting up to say something.” My family is hardly ever at a loss for words, but at that moment none were spoken.

I often consider what I should have said that morning, especially when I’m cooking a dish that reminds me of him. My Nonno was a cook of exceptional ability, even if I didn’t care for everything he made. Some of his best dishes are now my family’s favorites.

I could have shared the story of how he taught me to make meatballs and tomato sauce. I was about 16, so he was about 84, when I decided I wanted to know how he made one of my favorite meals. He lived with us and I didn’t know how much time I had left with him, but I did know it was likely one of us would no longer be living in the house in a few years.

“Non,” (pronounced Nawhn) I said one Saturday morning as he rattled his pots in preparation of cooking, “I want to know how to make your sauce.”

“No recipe,” he said in his thick accent as he tucked a dishtowel, lengthwise, into the waistband of his loose fitting pants and fashioned an apron for himself. Then he pointed to his bald head and said, “It’s all up here. You watch me and write it down if you want to make it for your husband someday.”

So I did. I watched him mix the spices, bread crumbs and ground beef into a sticky mound with his wrinkled bare hands. I carefully noted how many cans of tomato paste and glugs of olive oil he added to the thickening sauce. I savored the zesty aromas of garlic, basil and oregano as his concoctions began to cook. And I took great pleasure in knowing I’d written it all down so I could repeat it over and over long after he’d stopped cooking.

But there was so much more to my grandfather than just the Italian man with a great pot of red sauce. He had led a full life and he showed it in his cooking. He made dishes that were robust and hearty, not surprising from a man who still shoveled snow well into his 90s. His meals were as flavorful and unforgettable as his stories about arriving in the U.S. and making a life for himself.

I should have told the mourners how he made polenta and calamari long before either appeared on restaurant menus. Or how he fried zucchini flowers, baked whole fish, and prepared pasta fagoli soup of chickpeas, assorted vegetables and pasta. I would have added that these were meals he ate in his peasant-like youth. He grew up, the youngest of many, in a small town on the island of Sardinia, off the coast of Italy in the Mediterranean Sea. Beef and chicken were rarities on his dinner table as a child, but fish, vegetables, and cheeses were in abundance. My grandfather’s family was very poor, but the children were healthy.
I could have proudly shared how he learned many of his skills, cooking among them, in his years with the Italian navy and on merchant marine ships. In his dark paneled bedroom, hanging just above his recliner, was a black and white picture of him in his naval uniform. I would have looked over to my cousin as I told everyone how he and I always thought Nonno looked like Popeye.

I wanted that church full of family and friends to picture Nonno as I did, sitting in that recliner every night and reading the Italian newspaper my father picked up every morning at a newsstand in Manhattan. Nonno would have his slippered feet up and his oversized glasses on, and sometimes he’d be reading with his eyes closed. In winter, he’d be wearing a flannel shirt over a waffled undershirt and dark flannel lined pants. If it were summer, he’d be in a plain white tee shirt and dark pants. I don’t think I ever saw him in shorts, not even on the hottest of summer days.

The parish priest spoke a few words about my grandfather on that cold rainy morning, but the priest didn’t really know Nonno. The priest knew my parents and gleamed from them what he could. He said some generic comforting words, but never offered the congregates a chance to speak. Maybe that’s why none of us got up? Maybe someone was waiting for an invitation to share some memories? Maybe we would have been too heartbroken to accept that invitation?

If I had been brave and sturdy I would have told everyone that while growing up, I didn’t know Nonno wasn’t “educated.” He left school around the age of nine. But he could read, write and speak two languages, that’s better than many educated people I know. And he was smart.

He could repair, if only temporarily, almost anything—from a broken toy to a broken furnace—with string and duct tape. He knew how to grow beautiful tomatoes, cucumbers and zucchini in the garden he started after retiring from a building maintenance job in mid-town Manhattan. He knew how to keep a house full of kids in line.

I should have described his role as the night watchman, always asking where we were going and making sure he knew when we got back. It was the same conversation every time any of us went anywhere.

“Nonno, I’m going out,” I’d yell down the stairs.

“Where are you going?” he’d reply.

“To the store,” was my pat response, even if I was going elsewhere.

“What time you coming home?” was his next question. My response didn’t matter. He’d wait up until we were all back in the house. The next morning he’d give the night watchman’s report. “You were supposed to be home at 10. You didn’t come home until 12:30. What kind of store is opened until 12:30?”

He was also the bodyguard, watching me at the bus stop every morning, waving as the bus pulled away. And I always knew there’d be a snack waiting for
me upon my return. He'd cut up some fruit or pour me a glass of milk and put out some cookies. Nothing fancy, just an afternoon snack, but always something, every afternoon, without fail.

Mom worked, so Nonno took on the responsibility of preparing most of our dinners. He'd do the majority of the cooking during the day when everyone was out at work and school. Some days I'd come home and catch a lingering scent of sausage and peppers or chicken cutlets and take comfort in the anticipation of a good dinner. Other days I'd scowl at the smell of escarole or baked fish. “Yuck, Non, what did you make?” I'd always ask on those occasions.

“Don’t look at me like that. It’s good for you,” he’d reply, no matter what it was. But we both knew Mom would be making the kids something else for dinner.

He wanted us to eat everything he ate, but there was one thing that was off limits: Nonno juice. It was a mixed alcoholic brew of vermouth, bitters and some other liquor. My mother always told me it was similar to a Manhattan, but I’ve never had a Manhattan and I never had Nonno juice. One Christmas, when everyone but me was old enough to drink, Nonno brought out his juice after dessert. My parents, brothers, sisters-in-law, sisters and older cousin were there. Nonno poured small portions for everyone. Some of them liked it, and some of them didn’t. After a round or two of Nonno juice, he brought out Sambuca and someone demonstrated how to do flaming shots of the anise-flavored liquor. We were reminiscing about Christmases past and thoroughly enjoying ourselves. That is one of my most memorable holidays and probably the reason I don’t ever want to miss a Christmas Day at my parent’s house. Even though there is no more Nonno juice in the refrigerator, the Sambuca still comes out of the liquor cabinet every year.

Sharing that memory would have made many of the mourners smile, as they would have upon hearing some of the Italian Nonno taught me. Phrases like testa dura (hard head) and testa quadra (blockhead). When he got angry with us he'd wave his fist in the air and say “Ehhh, testa dura,” then turn away shaking his head in disbelief. Chiacchierona (someone who talks too much) is probably my favorite and one he used often during my teenage years.

I would have told everyone present that sorrowful day how I had prayed Nonno would live long enough to see me, his youngest grandchild, have a child of her own. I wanted my child to know, love and remember the wonderful grandfather that I had. My prayer was answered; my son was almost two when Nonno passed away in his 98th year.

After that I believe I would have been too choked up to go on, but at least I would have said my peace.

Sometimes I wonder what he must’ve thought of us that morning as he watched us from above. He might’ve said, “Georgie, you’re the oldest; you say something. Or you, Anthony, the next oldest boy, you always have a funny story to tell. Francesca, you never hesitate to speak your mind. You have nothing to share? Christi, Laura? My chiacchieronas so quite now?” He probably understood, being a private, reserved man of few words himself. He knew he was loved, that’s all that matters.
Tonight I’ll make my son Nonno nuggets (chicken nuggets as Nonno would have made them) and think about all the special words I should have said that January morning. While I regret not sharing his legacy in a eulogy on the day of his funeral, I comfort myself by keeping his spirit alive every time I share what he taught me with my family. I am proud to pass along his traditions and know that one day I will be a loving, generous Nonna thanks to all I learned from my loving, generous Nonno.
Bridget Ryder

A Girl and My Coat

My Mom pulled our gray mini-van into the back parking lot of the homeless shelter for which our junior high girls service club had made sandwiches. The Catholic Workers who ran Karen House, a House of Hospitality for women and children, would distribute the sandwiches to the poor and homeless of the neighborhood. As we pulled into the driveway, I saw a family consisting of a Dad and a teenage boy and girl walking down the sidewalk toward the house. They kept their heads down to try to shield their faces from the icy January wind. The two men both wore light jackets, but the girl wore only a gray sweatshirt. With her shoulders pulled up to ears and her hands tucked into the arms of her sweatshirt, she seemed to me the coldest person I had ever seen.

What was their situation? How had they come to walking the streets in winter without proper coats, hats, or gloves? I imagined they were good people simply down on their luck. Not seeing a mother with them, I supposed she had died and grief and medical bills had left them broke. Sympathy, especially for the girl rose in my heart and I had a burning desire to give her my coat.

I hopped out of the car and ran up the steps of the little porch to the door of Karen House. Hoping the family would reach the door by the time I finished delivering the sandwiches, I imagined just what I wanted say to the girl as I gave her my coat. “Here have my coat. I have another. You need it more than I do. Quick! Put it on while it is still warm from my body heat.” I could picture her surprise and joy as I helped put the coat on her.

But a struggle also ensued inside me. What would my Mom say? Would she be upset? The only other coat I had was a dress coat and it fit a bit tight. Would Mom let me wear it all the time? If not, could we really afford to buy me another coat?

Plus, my natural inhibitions resisted even the romantic heroism my imagination put before me.

When the door opened and I handed the Catholic Worker the sandwiches, the family was still a little distance from the house. As the girl turned to go inside with the sandwiches, I wanted to stop her and say, “Wait, here is my coat. Give it to that girl coming toward the house.” But in my shyness and uncertainty, I turned around and ran back down the steps and into the car.

As I stared out the window on the ride home, regret and disappointment in myself ate at my heart. I could only hope I would one day have a chance to make up for my lack of courage. Ten years later have passed since then and though the disappointment has worn off I have never had another opportunity for generosity as I did that day. Or perhaps I have and I just lack the courage and wisdom to see it.
Elaine Schaefer Davis

The Cradle Will Rock

What a Sikorski bedtime lullaby lacked in warmth, it made up in practicality.
“Time for bed, Twyla.”
“Yes, Mama.”
“First, take out the trash!”
“Yes, Papa.”

Twyla Sikorski was the last of her kind and, as a younger child, had often regretted it. The twelfth of a dozen children born to Pavel and Tonia Sikorski, and the only one still living at home, she’d always been the last to get anything: a full plate, a room of her own, or brand new underwear. Twyla’s bottom-rung perspective had forced her to adopt a patient attitude much younger than most, and everyone was always surprised to learn she was. “My, 8 years old already?” and then later, “I can’t believe you’re only twelve!” Just yesterday, while she was pulling her brother Mikhail’s weeds from along their front picket fence, wearing a bandana, robber-style, to protect her mouth and nose from the dirt-filled Texas wind, the mailman, Mr. Crockett, had teased her. “Sixteen? Are you sure?” But these days, with her last three brothers gone to join up, and her sister, Katia, married just last week, Twyla was finding more in all the empty rooms than she’d ever dreamed. She worried when her parents would realize she had to begin at four o’clock each afternoon to finish everyone’s bedtime chores and do something about it.
“Twyla, did you take out the trash?”
“Yes, Mama.”
“How about the cat?”
“Not yet.”
“Don’t forget, Twyla!”
“I won’t, Papa.”

How many nights had she listened to them remind Uri to put out the cat?

She was the only Sikorski born in Paris, Texas. Twyla sometimes mused, in her less respectful moments, that her parents must have celebrated with singular focus when they’d finally found a house big enough for their many offspring, thereby making one more. Of course their bedroom hadn’t always been at the top of the house, just since the Staffelbachs had moved in across the road. Twyla’s mother had complained bitterly about the long climb, but Pavel Sikorski had remained adamant, saying only, “It’s worth it.”

Twyla struggled to keep clear of the murky undercurrents so frequently dredged up by her parents, preferring instead the comfort of her own secret thoughts. Like dominoes placed on their long edge for greatest stability, and far enough apart so one badly planned piece couldn’t topple the rest, she gathered them close. She felt as the only Sikorski born in the house that that made it more hers than anyone’s, so she cared for it faithfully. Despite the ever-increasing list of
chores she was expected to complete, Twyla was actually relieved to know that reclaiming a simple overgrown flower bed, or setting the house to rights each night, was something she could actually change, and do better than anyone. She'd even learned all the sounds of the Sikorski homestead, and each night before bedtime, she faithfully counted all its shifts and sighs in time with the fifty brush strokes the Good Housekeeping magazine had recommended for long, coal-black hair such as hers. “15,” the last symphony of stairway squeaks as Papa lumbered up to bed. “16,” the loose rain spout outside the kitchen window that jigged every time he slammed the laundry chute door. “17,” the… Twyla paused mid-stroke. …the thudding slap of fists landing a good one? Not an unknown sound in her overheated Texas town, but still unusual for her short street. Of course the roadhouse was always a rowdy place but it was absolutely forbidden to Sikorski children. “Stay away from The Lone Star. That’s where all those filthy Germans across the street go to get drunk!” her Papa always raved. Actually, there were only six Germans in all of Paris, and both families lived quietly across the road. The Staffelbachs and the Rosengartens shared the dead-end half of Pecos Lane with the Sikorskis, and the Rosengartens were gone, visiting their son, Jacob, in Galveston, before he was due to ship-out for San Diego and then his parents feared, somewhere in the Pacific. So either the Staffelbachs had caused some kind of commotion, or something strange was going on outside.

Just as Twyla crept toward her window to investigate, her parents called a final goodnight.

“Twyla, I left the empty milk bottles in the sink.”
“I’ll put them on the porch, Mama.”
“Double-check the black-out curtains!”
“Yes, Papa.”

Moving over to her window, Twyla paused just long enough to turn off her bedside lamp, before she peeked between both sets of curtains. Down in the new-moon black, dimly lit by a single stream of light coming from their open front door, were Mr. Staffelbach and his son, Anton. The younger man was stumbling, kicking up a dust cloud and swinging doubled fists at his father, gasping, and crying with every desperate effort. Doing his best to stay out of range by backing away, Mr. Staffelbach led Anton through a jagged, circular dance, forcing him to chase his father in order to throw each wild punch. Twyla watched, sick to her stomach, as Anton landed one across his father’s chin. Mr. Staffelbach stumbled back, but kept moving, all the while trying to calm his distraught son. Finally, Anton’s steam was spent, and he dropped to his knees. Still standing, Mr. Staffelbach also fell forward, catching his weight with his hands on his knees, panting, and kept a cautious eye on Anton.

“Twyla, dear?”
“Twyla, the curtains. The cat!”
Forcing herself to swallow her dinner for the second time that night, Twyla barely managed to call back. “I’m on my way, Papa!”
She hurried from her second floor room, brushing the tears out of her eyes, and reached the kitchen in record time. Yanking the cat away from its food
dish, Twyla earned a hissing spit and several scratches as she wrestled it out the back door. Flooded with a rush of jubilant adrenaline, Twyla ignored the cat’s angry whining, grabbed the empty milk bottles, and ran for the front of the house. Despite her screaming pulse, which had kept pace with every frantic step that chased her from the house, Twyla somehow managed to step quietly outside and, for the first time, noticed Mrs. Staffelbach on her own front porch across the road. She was slumped against the porch post holding her wadded apron against her mouth, with stricken eyes wide and visible above it. When she realized her family was drawing an audience, her focus suddenly shifted to Twyla, and Mrs. Staffelbach’s body snapped as taut as the wooden beam at her side. Then, by minute increments, the older woman unclenched her fingers, and let the apron fall back into place. Mrs. Staffelbach smoothed the innocent cotton against her legs as if trying to calm herself along with the traitorous wrinkles she’d just created.

Movement between them drew the attention of both women back to the men, and Twyla watched as Mr. Staffelbach cautiously approached Anton, who by then lay on his stomach in the dirt road. Now that he could, he stroked his grown son’s lemon-yellow hair, trying to help it back into place. After a few more tender tries, he abandoned the effort and knelt beside Anton, gently rolled him to his back, levered him up and over one shoulder, and grunted to a stand. Mr. Staffelbach turned heavily under his burden, and began the walk back to his house. Twyla took several trembling steps along with them, as if tethered, until she reached the front edge of the Sikorski porch steps, and stopped. Bracing each hand on either porch post, Twyla called quietly.

“Good night, Mr. Staffelbach.”

As father and son kept moving, the dry Texas wind swept soft each deeply cut boot-print. Straining to hear, leaning out until she’d eased herself over the edge and down onto the first step, Twyla felt the hug in his thick reply.

“Good night, liebchen.”
Ally McWilliams

When I Was There

It was snowing.
And in your hair fell
Flakes of glass, glittering
Like bright eyes in the sun.

Wrapped in your crimson velvet cloak,
You quietly smiled at the clouds
Yet saw nothing but a faceless white tent
Sloping down like an avalanche.

Your bent fingers reached for it, a
Lion clawing for prey.
Held back by your warm crimson cloak
You felt silence icing over milky-blue eyes.

When I was there
The tent fell slowly,
A parachute sailing to the ground.
And like a fallen butterfly, you lay,
Your red velvet wings open, inviting
Me to see you fallen.
Duck Duck Goose
Or
How to Find Cover During Hand-to-Hand Conversation,
and Still Get Your Man in the End

A Comedy in One Act

By

By Elaine Schaefer Davis

Characters
Harry (a 60 year-old husband)
Evelyn (a 60 year-old wife)

Scene: An autumn morning. Harry is sitting in the driver’s seat of the family car, in the driveway of his Kokomo, Indiana home, ready to leave on his annual pilgrimage to Chicago. The engine is running on their pea green 1975 Ford Mustang, and in addition to checking his watch and sighing frequently, Harry is having great difficulty sitting still. Harry and Evelyn have been married for 35 years, and Evelyn is keeping Harry waiting, again. With much bluster and stowing of her gear, Evelyn settles herself in the front passenger seat.

HARRY: (mutters) Finally.

EVELYN: (looks up at Harry) Oh, wait just a minute. (exits car)

HARRY: (checks watch, and calls after her) Evelyn!!

EVELYN: (returns) Okay, let’s go.

HARRY: (starts driving the car) What’d you forget this time?

EVELYN: This time…I forgot your glasses. (hands Harry the glasses)

HARRY: (puts on glasses)

EVELYN: (clears throat)

HARRY: (mumbles) Thank you.

EVELYN: You know, if you’d pick one spot to always leave your glasses, like I do, you’d always…(inhales abruptly)
HARRY: What? (Harry yells as he looks around frantically at the traffic near the car.) What?!

EVELYN: Oh, nothing.

HARRY: Look, you almost make me crash the car and then you say, oh nothing?

EVELYN: Well, isn’t Illinois back that way?

HARRY: (looks around at landmarks. Then points annoyingly at the gas gauge) We need gas. I drove this direction to get gas. (Harry pulls off the road and into a gas station.)

EVELYN: (smiles lovingly at Harry) That was smart of you, dear. (reaches into purse, withdraws camera; starts to load it with film)

HARRY: (Harry notices and shakes his head as he watches her begin the process, then exits car. Harry is only gone for a couple of minutes and then climbs right back in)

EVELYN: Well, that didn’t take long.

HARRY: I was just topping it off.

EVELYN: Doesn’t the sign say you shouldn’t…

HARRY: Chicago, Evelyn. It’s going to take a full tank to get to Chicago.

EVELYN: Well, of course you’re right again, dear. (she smiles adoringly)

(The camera is now automatically advancing the film to the first frame, making noise)

HARRY: Why do you always load your camera when we take a trip? You’ve never even taken one picture. Not in 35 years!

EVELYN: Well, it’s just in case. I especially like to in the fall. The colors are so vivid. Especially in the Perrysburg area we drive through.

HARRY: Well, if you ask me, it’s a waste of money.

EVELYN: But I didn’t, sweetheart. (pats his knee) Just relax, Harry. Would you like me to drive?

HARRY: Are you kidding? (aghast)
EVELYN: Why no dear. It’s just that you’ve been working so hard lately. You’re all tense.

HARRY: (rotates neck, grimly) I’m fine.

Things are quiet for a few minutes, and Harry sighs as he begins to relax. He even starts to smile but then EVELYN begins a rustling noise with some paper.

HARRY: (He snaps) What are you doing?

EVELYN: Just checking the map.

HARRY: Put it away.

EVELYN: Why, Harry?

HARRY: We’ve driven this same route to get to my lodge meeting, twice a year, for the last 35. I do not, need, a map.

EVELYN: Oh, I know that, but I heard this advertisement the other day about a new walking trail along the Wabash River. It’s supposed to offer some wonderful photo opportunities, and the turn off is coming up soon.

HARRY: We’re driving (opens both hands resting his wrists on the steering wheel) to Chicago, Evelyn.

EVELYN: Well, of course I know that dearest. But the trail is almost exactly half way. If you could just get out and stretch your legs, it would help relieve some of your horrible tension.

HARRY: (Growling now) I’m not tense.

EVELYN: (peering closely at him) Are your glasses bother…?

HARRY: I said. I’m fine.

EVELYN: Maybe we should get your eyes checked again. (mumbles as she refolds the map and puts it away in her big carry-all bag.)

HARRY: Hey, look at that idiot! Would you look at the crazy way he’s driving that rig?

EVELYN: Oh, you know what horribly long hours those poor drivers spend behind the wheel. He’s probably just a little tense.
HARRY: (abruptly turns his head in to look at her; amazed. Looks back, and starts squinting as he plans.) You hate going to my lodge meetings, don’t you, Evelyn?

EVELYN: Haven’t I gone with you…twice a year for the last 35?

HARRY: You probably want me to quit the lodge!!

EVELYN: (starts laughing)

HARRY: What’s so funny?

EVELYN: It’s just those little hats you all wear. They’ve always reminded me of a…

HARRY: They’re symbolic!

EVELYN: (eyes wide in surprise) Of what, dear?

HARRY: (pausest, gripping the steering wheel to control himself) I’m not allowed to say.

EVELYN: (Evelyn notices his hands) Harry, loosen your grip on the wheel. It’s already dead.

HARRY: Evelyn, give me a stick of gum.

EVELYN: (Evelyn begins scrambling through her purse and finds a package) You know what Doc Fry said, it’ll only increase the tension in your jaw. (but gives him one anyway)

HARRY: (chewing noisily) Another!

EVELYN: (she complies, warns him) This is getting serious, Harry.

HARRY: (chews even more industriously)

EVELYN: Your face is turning red, Har…
HARRY: (Grimaces against a sharp pain and grabs his face with his right hand)

EVELYN: I knew this would happen. You’re having an attack!

HARRY: (talks funny) I just bit my tongue.
EVELYN: Harry, sweetheart, please pull over and let me take a turn! You shouldn’t be driving in your condition.

HARRY: I’m not in labor, Evelyn. A man can bite off the tip of his tongue and still operate heavy machinery.

EVELYN: But that’s my point, Harry. With me along, you don’t have to. Just for a little while, please. You could put the seat-back down, and take a nap.

HARRY: (Harry silently continues driving with one hand over his mouth)

EVELYN: (Evelyn hurriedly starts scrounging in her big carry-all, shuffling the contents repeatedly, looking for an elusive item. Suddenly she sits up with the treasure, holding it so Harry can see.) Do you need a band-aid?

HARRY: (stunned, Harry stares at her, then toward the audience) You win. (Harry pulls over and they switch places. Harry tries to get comfortable, grumpily shifting to find a good position. Evelyn whips out a travel pillow, which Harry accepts a little suspiciously. As soon as he settles, Evelyn whips out a lap quilt and drapes it over him.)

EVELYN: (A little while later, amidst much snoring from Harry, Evelyn parks the car) Wake up, Harry. We’re here.

HARRY: (Harry mumbles groggily) What? Chicago, already?

EVELYN: Oh no. (she climbs out of the car and inhales the fresh air, with relish.) We’re at that lovely walking trail I mentioned. (Evelyn leans back in, urging Harry) Get out of the car, Harry…and go stand over there on that darling stone bridge. I’m going to take your picture.

HARRY: (Harry groans)
Krista Pohl

Light Flashes

Lights flash on a naked silhouette, female and beautiful
Lights flash on a crumpled dollar bill and glitter off cheap jewelry
On swaying hips
On a sign that reads Lap Dances $30
On rich kid saying, I’ll give you six
On a ocean of stretch marks shaped like feet
On an unknown man throwing up in the corner
On wanna-be ballers who catcall and jeer
On a rough hand smacking an overweight ass too hard
On golden, red, black, brown, curly, straight, scraggly, natty hair
On a pair of old army buddies, drunk and stupid
On a dancer being fined $200, she’s leaving early, her son is sick
On a $2 bill being slid down a g-string
On a stranger’s hand sliding up a naked thigh like he owns it
On the leg’s real owner, nervously smiling as she grits her teeth
On the beautiful outstretched V of split legs
On the track marks of bruised white arms
On the stares of 100 pairs of eyes
Lights flash and glisten off beads of sweat collected on silky black skin
Lights flash on the dance, female and beautiful
Krista Pohl

Memory of a Photograph

The picture is long gone
But the details are like concrete
Poured in my ears, set in my brain
The same as on that glossy sheet of paper.

Daddy’s girls

We are naked
On either side of him
Sitting up in bed
He is reading a bedtime story

I’m the one on the left
The one with the skinny body
The scraggly, ratty hair
I’m picking my nose

My sisters surround their dad like a halo
Beth is leaning on him
Golden hair cascading over his chest like
The fountain of youth

Kato is nuzzled in his lap
Like a soft small dog
Peeking up at his face
Through a mane of dirty hair

Almost unexpectedly,
The truth slams into me
Like a glass hitting a brick wall
It only lasts momentarily

This is who I used to be to him
A skinny little girl who picked her nose.
Enamored with him and his story.
We were family—
Then
When Jonathan regained consciousness for the final time, the crippling pain in his left leg had trickled down to nothing at all. His first thought was that he was lying in a hospital bed, or at least a triage unit doped up on a massive dose of Demerol. But as his eyes began to clear, they were met by only faint flickers of light from perhaps a half-dozen seams in the rubble. He was still buried, his left leg pinned beneath a support beam that had crashed down from the roof above, and the rest of his body was apparently immobilized by other debris that had piled up around him, though he couldn't make any of it out in the dim cavity. He was aware of the beam only because he had seen it fall. He tried to shift his weight, unsuccessfully. Had he been able to do that earlier? He couldn't remember.

He wondered how long he had been passed out. The light filtering in through the debris allowed him a crude measure of the passage of time. He was pretty sure his limited field of vision had been awash in darkness when he was last awake. He remembered dozing off in intermittent intervals, always interrupted by fresh outbursts of unbearable pain from his leg. Now the pain had not merely subsided; it was gone completely, and he weighed the fact that he no longer had it to deal with and what that meant. Even an amputee feels some sort of phantom pain, he thought; this was the absence of any pain whatsoever.

The business trip out to the coast was supposed to have been uneventful. Alison, his administrative assistant, had managed to finesse an upgrade to first class on the flight out from Chicago. She was good at schmoozing the travel agents at American Express. The woman assigned to the aisle seat next to him on the plane had proven to be an able conversationalist. She had talked of art shows and charitable causes. She was flying onward the next morning to spend a few days with her husband in Honolulu, but had suggested sharing a drink together later in the evening at a bar near the hotel where Jonathan was staying. He had considered her invitation, glancing out the window to catch a glimpse of the Bay Bridge as the plane banked into a turn making its approach. He had mulled the fantasy over in his mind, the possibility of something more, of spending the night with her, knowing that he was reading way too much into an innocent gesture, but then he had accepted her offer. He thought now about Molly and his daughter Jennifer back home in Chicago. In the midst of the rubble, he speculated that God was punishing him for his considered indiscretion. It was a purely rhetorical surmise, not meant to be taken seriously. At least not yet. He wondered where the woman from the plane might have been when the buildings began to tumble down.

After touchdown, the plane had sat on the tarmac for 25 minutes waiting for its scheduled gate to be vacated. He had overheard one of the flight attendants mention something about last minute maintenance on the other plane. Finally, they were diverted to an alternate gate, though one which only
added to the inconvenience of the delay. He had considered calling ahead on his cell phone to offer an embellished apology to the client for his tardiness. He elected instead not to share a cab ride downtown with his new friend and go directly to the client’s offices. This was the third or fourth time he had been out for a face-to-face visit. There had been trickles of activity that made the earlier trips justified, but this time the purpose was to cement a long term relationship growing out of the service commitment which the client had come to expect and appreciate from Jonathan’s company. He was proposing a significant expansion of their business relationship, built on this trust, and he needed to be on time. His hotel room was guaranteed. He would check into it after the meeting.

In some ways, he counted himself lucky. His client’s offices were on the top floor of a three story adjoining building that ran between and connected two high-rise office towers. Enough debris had rained down from the towers to cave in the roof and bury him beneath the rubble, but he guessed that the towers themselves were still standing because otherwise he would have been crushed by the shear weight of their collapse. He had seen that possibility realized first hand in the opening moments of the earthquake. He imagined that rescue efforts would be focused on people who had survived but were trapped in the upper floors of the high-rises, but that should draw attention to the possibility of survivors like himself, buried but still alive in the connecting buildings below. It was a faint hope that he returned to repeatedly, the ideal of being found quickly before anything worse might befall him.

As it happened, the traffic had been lighter than expected from the airport and he had actually reached his client’s offices ahead of schedule. The receptionist position had obviously changed hands since his last visit. Her predecessor, Kelly, would have known him by name. He introduced himself and indicated he had an 11:00 am meeting with Brad, the client’s CFO. A familiar voice echoed back from the intercom. Kelly had been promoted. She was now Brad’s admin assistant, and she welcomed Jonathan and escorted him into the adjacent company boardroom. In the center was the heavy oak table that had shielded him from the worst of the collapse taking place around him in the minutes that shortly followed. There was an overhead projector ready to be set up at the near end of the table. He connected the leads from his laptop while Kelly went over to a side panel of switches. A screen appeared, descending from a cavity in the ceiling. As he was testing the connections, making sure the image was in focus, Brad came in through a door at the other end of the room, along with two of his vice-presidents. There were introductions; Jonathan had met one of the VPs briefly on a prior visit, the other person was new to him. After some initial pleasantries, the four of them—Kelly, Brad and the two VPs—took seats at the far end of the table. Kelly opened a steno pad to begin listing the questions that Brad and the others were sure to raise as the presentation went forward. Jonathan returned to the opposite end to run through his Powerpoint slides, broadly outlining the plan for the new business relationship before knuckling down to the finer details.

Jonathan had been into his fourth slide when the first tremor hit the Bay
Area. The room quivered. The locals, having become perhaps too accustomed to these kinds of shakes, had taken little initial notice. Jonathan, from windy but unshakable Chicago, grabbed the near edge of the table. The next tremor caused the table to shift, and knocked him off his feet. He would never know what sort of a reaction it had elicited in the others. In a matter of moments, their lives—all four of them—were about to be abruptly snuffed out.

As Jonathan was grabbing the near edge of the oak table, high above on the 28th floor of one of the towers, an attorney found himself abruptly cut off in mid-sentence, talking with a client on the phone, and he too was now clinging to the edge of his desk to steady himself. He could feel the building moving in an almost surreal rhythm synchronized to the shaking going on around him, and he then remembered that the high-rise towers had been built on some kind of rollers that allowed them to absorb and dissipate the vibrations radiating up from the deep earth below. He shoved the desk chair aside and crawled into the space his legs had just vacated, hopeful that the top of the desk would shield him from falling ceiling tiles and debris from above. Jonathan, some 25 floors below, had sought the shelter of the oak table almost at the same time.

As the attorney turned round toward the windows behind where he had just been sitting, he saw something across the way even more surreal than the tower’s rhythmic vibrations. The other tower was also swaying, just as he now imagined his must be, when suddenly it stopped as abruptly as his phone call and became rigid, as if the mechanism that was cushioning the shock waves had locked in place. He watched in disbelief as an angled fissure formed across the face of the wall. There was an ear splitting crack as stone separated from stone. The upper wall of the opposite tower seemed to hang momentarily in midair, then it tipped toward him, sheared off along the fissure, and fell away.

In the conference room below, Jonathan was similarly sheltered from falling debris beneath the edge of the oak table. He tried to listen for the voices of the others, but he couldn’t differentiate their sounds from the overwhelming noise all around him, the breaking glass, the shearing and bending of metal ductwork: the fractures in concrete flooring and supporting members, the scores of tiny explosions as electrical lines were severed by forces beyond human comprehension. He turned toward the far end of the table to see if anyone had joined him underneath, but the view of the other end was obscured by a central support. He had never experienced an earthquake other than seeing pictures of the aftermath. He had nothing on which to judge its severity. He would later overhear someone mention that it had been of magnitude 8.6, though he would never come to find out what that actually meant. The quake that hit San Francisco in 1906 was estimated to be an 8, and each step up the scale increased the intensity by a factor of 10. So Jonathan’s was roughly six times more severe. But in his ignorance and presumed safety under the oak table, he figured he could simply ride it out.

The impact as the severed upper wall of the tower crashed through the roof above him sliced the boardroom in half and took Brad, Kelly and the two vice-presidents into the oblivion of a crater that plunged through all three
stories and 25 feet into the ground below. It weakened the supporting members holding up what was left of the connecting structure, and in fits and starts, the walls and floors collapsed and filled up with debris. It was the gradual fits and starts and the sturdy oak table overhead that keep Jonathan’s fall from the third floor to near ground level from killing him. It might even have been a landing he could have walked away from, but for the concrete beam that decided to crash down on his left leg below the knee after the building had finally stopped crumbling beneath him. It drove a shearing pain into his body so intense that he simply passed out. When he awoke that first time, he realized that he was trapped in some sort of cavity formed by the accumulated debris and protected by the remains of the table over his head.

During the periods of his ordeal when he was awake, Jonathan’s mind wandered over many terrains. He thought about the fate of the woman on the plane. He also thought about Brad, Kelly, and the vice-presidents. The suddenness with which the tower wall had plunged into their building below had left insufficient time for the mind to fully grasp what had just occurred. The room had flooded with light as the roof caved in from the initial impact. The far end of the table collapsed; that much he could see because the center support had been sheared away. And through the dust he could make out a massive hole in the floor where the opposite end of the room had once been. He couldn’t know if the others had survived, but he thought it extremely unlikely. And his thoughts then turned to the suddenness in which he imagined they had been swept away. He wondered at the fact that fate seemed to have spared him, and took them, all because of which end of the table they had occupied. It reminded him of a painting of The Last Supper he’d once seen in an art history class, all the apostles gathered to one side of the table, and Judas isolated and alone on the opposite side. He decided that was perhaps more of a metaphor than his situation warranted, though he found himself drawn back to it several times for inexplicable reasons. For one thing, it made him think of food. There had been a luncheon arranged for after his presentation to talk over certain parts of the new business plan in a more relaxed atmosphere. He should have been more conscious of hunger now that the pain in his leg had dropped away to nothing. But he realized that he didn’t actually feel any pangs despite having been buried for at least a day and a half since the complementary service on the flight coming out. Did he sense a certain amount of dehydration? He wasn’t sure.

As the hours wore on the light filtering in through the cracks dimmed and day turned into night. Not given to solitude and meditation, Jonathan welcomed the chance to drift through sleep, unencumbered by the anxieties and low-grade panic that had seeped into his mind now that it was no longer distracted by the pain. Except he didn’t feel especially drowsy. Perhaps the various times spent passed out had been more than enough to satisfy the urge. He tried to close his eyes, but even they refused to cooperate. The thoughts that had begun to stream continuously through his mind in helter-skelter fashion just poured on. He began to wish for the pain back again to distract him from himself. The night wore on and became morning.
And then something hoped for but still unexpected happened. As the light flickered in through the breaks in the debris, there was a sudden burst of intensity as one or two stones were lifted away and the opening widened. He heard voices. “Oh my God,” he thought silently, “they are actually coming for me. I’m going to be rescued.” He tried to cry out, but his parched throat seemed incapable of uttering a sound. “I must be more dehydrated than I realized,” he decided. “I’ll simply wait them out.”

Bit by bit the stone and twisted metal was pulled away, and in one magical moment, the sunlight actually streamed in and fell on his arm. Jonathan couldn’t help himself. He tried again and again to cry out to them, “I’m here! I’m here!” But with each try the words never came. It was as though he thought the cries, but was unable to make his mouth form the words.

“Hold it,” he heard someone call out. “I think I see something. Give me your light.” In the next instant a flashlight beam swept over areas that the sunlight had yet to touch.

“There’s someone down here. Hello! Hello! He looks like he could be alive, but he may be unconscious. It would be a fucking miracle if we turned up someone alive after all this time. We need to get this stone removed, but be careful what you’re doing.”

Jonathan’s heart swelled. The fear, the dread over not being found was washed away in an instant. Then it resurfaced just as quickly. What if he had managed to fall asleep and this was only some vivid dream of wish fulfillment. No, he was convinced he was awake; he’d been awake continuously for at least the last 18 hours. And it was no hallucination brought on by hunger or thirst. Certainly no mirage in this desert of stone and metal fragments. It was only a matter of time now. He was sure of it. He just needed to wait it out a bit longer.

Now the stone and metal was being pulled away with care but also with an urgency born of hope. They had found someone — Jonathan pictured their reactions in his mind—possibly someone still alive, in all this crumpled mess. Gradually the cavity in which he had become trapped was revealed to him, as it was finally opening yet again to the light of day. He could see the towers, still standing as he’d imagined. He saw his pinned leg crushed beneath the beam. He saw the remains of the oak table that had kept him safe; he saw his arms and body once again.

And then a new disturbing thought emerged. He hadn’t been as encased in debris as he had originally thought. He should have been able to move his arms and perhaps shift his free leg at least a little, adjust his weight, but he remember having tried to do this unsuccessfully. He took on a new anxiety. Perhaps in the fall, as the building crumbled around him, his neck had taken a severe hit and he was paralyzed. Had he been able to shift around initially, right after the collapse? He thought about Christopher Reeve, trying to imagine life as a quadriplegic. But this could also explain the absence of the pain in his leg. One concern supplanted by another. Well, no matter. He was alive; no doubts in that department. He would deal with these issues once he learned of his actual condition.
Throughout the rescue efforts, the people removing the broken slabs of concrete and twisted metal kept calling out to Jonathan, but he remained unable to answer them. This never seemed to dull their efforts, though it did reinforce his fears that the injuries he’d suffered were considerably more severe than initially surmised. But once they’d reached him, and realized that he was still alive, the worst part of his ordeal would finally be over.

And the moment did finally arrive. Two rescuers knelt beside him. One touched his hand to Jonathan's neck in what almost seemed a welcoming gesture; then he simply shook his head.

"Check his wrist," the other rescuer suggested.

"Nothing."

"You sure, cause his body doesn’t feel cold."

"I'm sure. Fuck! Do you realize this guy was probably still alive as recently as 12 or 18 hours ago. If we’d just gotten to him a day sooner."

Jonathan heard the words, but none of what was said made any sense to him. "Hold a mirror up to my nose or something," he thought to himself. "Check for a whisp of my breath." Not that he could form the speech to tell them.

"See if there’s any identification," the other man said.

Jonathan watched as his rescuer's hand dipped beneath his line of sight, and then reappeared with the wallet from his inside jacket pocket.

"Jonathan Abernathy. From Chicago. Looks like he had a wife and daughter back home." He held up the picture in the wallet.

"He picked the wrong day to show up here; that’s for sure."

"Yeah."

"What do we need to do to get his leg free?"

"We can drop a line to lift the beam, but there isn’t much of any leg left to recover. I’m inclined to just cut it away, transfer him to the morgue and then ship the body back to Chicago."

"All right. You want to close his eyes?"

"Yeah, sure."

Jonathan saw the first of his rescuers reach up to his face, two fingers extended toward his eyes. "What the hell are you doing," he tried to scream at him, to no avail. The fingers came to rest on his eyelids, then lowered them ushering in darkness yet again, though with a faint tint as a bit of sunlight still filtered through. Though he could not feel it, his body was gently lifted from its recent resting place and placed down again onto heavy plastic. He sensed the movement only by the flickering changes in the intensity of the light as shadows passed over his closed eyelids. His right foot was tucked inside a cavity; his left foot had been left behind. Then he heard the unmistakable sound of a zipper, sensed more than felt a slight tug as the body bag closed around him and even the faint tint of filtered sunlight through his closed eyelids was gone. He was awash in darkness again, and filled with his thoughts. Always with his thoughts.

It would be dark now for a very long time.
Krista Pohl

Paper Heart

He cut my heart out
Said it was for the best
He filled the hole with paper roses
Filled my ears with promises
He stitched it up with golden thread
Carefully, gently
It held up for awhile
The roses made me feel pretty inside
But then the paper began to rot
And the stench
It came out of my lips,
Between my legs
It rotted my teeth
It was then I realized—
I was dead
After all, roses may breathe
But they can’t
beat like a fist
beat like a heart
Krista Pohl

She Was My Mother

Karen told everyone in Springfield she was my mother and that she was proud to be a prostitute. But when we were high or making love she told me we were meant to be together and she’d much rather be a Madame. She would slur with crazed eyes right before she snaked her tongue through my lips and asked me to come to Cabool with her. Of course she would ruin it by suggesting I have sex with a meth-head for a few hits. She would mend my words with, You’re supposed to be my beautiful baby, baby. As it was, I ended up in Ash Grove with bloody pants and never saw her again.
As Walter slowly made his way across the dining room, leaning heavily on his cane, I silently prayed for him to sit somewhere, anywhere, but at one of the tables in my section. “Keep moving, Walter. That’s it, don’t sit down.” I repeated this silently to myself as I watched his progress from across the room. Of course, he sat in my section. “Good luck, Amber,” said Jeff, another waiter who was familiar with the frustration of serving Walter. With a long sigh, I grabbed my tray and proceeded across the dining room towards him. I glanced at the clock as I approached his table. It was already 6:00 p.m. Most of the residents had finished their meals. Only a few people remained, sipping their coffee, eating dessert, or getting ready to leave. I wondered to myself why Walter always arrived so late to dinner.

When he reached the table, I took his cane and set it gently against the wall. Then I helped Walter scoot in his chair. He sat waiting for me to read the menu items to him, a skinny shrunken man, bald, with liver spots and wearing Mr. Magoo glasses. “How are you today, Walter?” I asked in the friendliest voice I could manage.

Walter inclined his head in my direction, his hearing aid cranked on high. “Grape juice, tall,” he rasped. Walter thought I had asked for his drink order. He assumed what people were talking about more than he actually heard what they were saying. I turned to go. Walter placed his gnarled hand on my arm. “Soup,” he said, looking up at me with those milky see-through eyes. I quickly grabbed a bowl and ladled some chicken gumbo into it. Placing the bowl on the table in front of Walter, I then proceeded to get his juice, ignoring a large woman seated at another section, her hand thrust impatiently into the air trying to get my attention.

Returning with his grape juice, I found that Walter had already managed to spill half the contents of the soup on the table and himself. I gingerly set the tall glass of grape juice down, wishing it was in a sipper cup like the one my little brother drank from. “Would you like to fill out a menu now, Walter?” I asked. He glanced up at me, confused. To illustrate what I was talking about, I gently waved the menu in my hand. Then comprehension dawned on his face. He slowly nodded to me. “What have we got today?” he asked.

“Well,” I said, “our menu items are chicken fingers or lasagna.”

“What?” said Walter.

I hated this, knowing it was inevitable that I would end up having to yell the contents of the menu to him. Then in a loud voice that caused the other residents to jump and my own face to flush with embarrassment, I yelled, “Chicken fingers or lasagna!”

“Chicken fingers,” said Walter. “What’s the vegetable?”

“They have green beans or stewed tomatoes.”

“Baked potatoes?” asked Walter.
“No, I said they have stewed tomatoes.”

“Oh,” he paused for a moment thinking. “I’ll take green beans.”

As I turned to leave, Walter stopped me again. With intense scrutiny, he tried to read my name tag, the small pen fastened to my shirt which said in bold black print, “Amber.” “Omar, I’d like some coffee with my meal please.”

I nodded, smiled and hurriedly went to my other tables.

The residents sat as impatient as little kids, their hands waving frantically in the air. They were oblivious to my dealings with Walter, knowing only that to them I was taking too long with their dessert. By the time I got Walter’s food from the remains in the back and heated it in the microwave, the dining area was empty except, of course, for Walter. Once again I questioned why he always came so late to dinner. While he sat eating and drinking his coffee, I quickly began to reset my tables, hoping I wouldn’t be here too late after my break. I had a big test coming up that I needed to study for.

The “fly Joke” came as I was changing a table next to where Walter sat. Resting his hand on my arm he said, “Omar, did I ever tell you the joke about the four flies?” Walter had said this joke for years to every member of the wait staff, repeatedly.

“No Walter,” I said, humoring him, “you didn’t.”

Happily clearing his throat, he began. “There were four flies.”

I glanced longingly at the clock, my break time disappearing before my eyes, the unmade tables of the dining room waiting.

Walter continued with his joke. “My wife came home and I told her, ‘Sylvia, I killed four flies today, two boy flies and two girl flies.’ Well, she looked at me and said, ‘Walter, how did you know which flies were boys and which flies were girls?’ ‘It was easy, the girl flies were sitting on the telephone, and the boy flies had landed on my beer bottle.’”

If I hadn’t heard this joke a million times before, I would have waited patiently for Walter to continue to the punch line. Since I knew this was the end of the joke, I forced my best fake laugh. “Ha-ha! That’s a good one Walter.”

He smiled, the deep wrinkles of his face creasing, pleased with himself. I frantically went back to setting my tables, my break time long gone. Finally Walter left, I reset his table and flew through my closing duties, stocking supplies and cleaning the salad bar. I clocked out at seven thirty. Then I walked through the chilly night air to my car, headed for home. I didn’t see Walter again until Saturday, two days later.

My first task that Saturday consisted of delivering room trays. These were meals prepared for the residents who didn’t have the energy to make it to the dining room for dinner. I passed Walter in the hall on his cane. He managed a feeble wave. I returned the greeting and hurried on. I delivered my tray to a woman named Miss Tucker, who always inspected each item. The highlight of
her day was to find something wrong with her food so she could lecture me about how old she was, how long she had lived at the nursing home, how much money she paid, that she never asked for much just a decent meal, her opinions continued on from there. Well, today was no exception. Her soup wasn’t what she considered hot enough even though it bubbled in the cup like molten lava.

After leaving her company some time later, I was surprised to see that Walter hadn’t progressed so much as half way down the hall.

I didn’t see him at lunch, then at dinner he was late again. Before leaving the dining room he piled apples, bananas, and oranges into his pockets, trying to sneak away with the extra food. Jim, our manager caught him and tried to explain that he couldn’t take all the food with him. Later when I was wiping down Walter’s chair, I came across his dentures. He had left them in a plastic bag on the seat. I went to his room to return them. He tried to pay me for my help. He fumbled through his wallet while I explained that I wasn’t allowed to accept money from the residents. All in all it was a really long day.

I sat in the break room, savoring a cup of coffee and a few peaceful minutes to myself. Some nurses came into the room laughing loudly. At first I tried to ignore them and their conversation of bed pans, but it didn’t work very well. “I told Mr. Stewart that he needed to take a bath,” said one nurse. “You know what he told me? ‘Sharon, I don’t need a bath this morning I took a whirl pool.’ Can you believe that! He sits in the hot tub and calls it a bath!” The nurses all laugh, and even I couldn’t help smiling over my cup of coffee. Then their talk changed to a more sympathetic tone. “He came in again this evening,” said one nurse. “Every night he stays by her side. She doesn’t even know he’s there. I’m sure in another day Sylvia will be gone. He just sits and talks to her, holding her hand.”

“Poor Walter,” said Sharon, “it takes him so long to hobble anywhere on that cane. I tell him every night that he is going to be late to dinner. He’s so deaf I can’t tell if he just doesn’t hear what I say or if he chooses to ignore me.” The nurses are silent for a moment.

The conversation changes to how so and so’s hair looks and who’s dating which nurse. I stood up from the table feeling numb. Abandoning my coffee, I went to the rest room and splashed cold water on my face. I paused in front of the mirror, studying this person looking back at me. How patient had I ever really been with Walter? Everyday he was always calm while dealing with growing old, hurting, losing his friends and waiting for his wife to die. I dried my face and left the bathroom.

The next day, I wasn’t myself. Things in the dining room were hectic, but I viewed it all as if in slow motion. Walter arrived late again to dinner. I didn’t have his section. I watched Jeff yell the menu at Walter. He looked just as exasperated as I’d always been towards the old man. Then I looked at Walter, his eyes quietly averted through the ordeal, calmly giving his choices. I noticed his difficulty with the soup spoon, it seemed to struggle in his hand. Later when the dining room was empty, except of course for Walter, when even Jeff had gone on break, I lingered. Wandering over, I pretended to straighten a napkin at a table right next to where he was sitting. I smiled when I felt the familiar gentle hand
on my arm. “Yes, Walter?” I said, turning to face him. Once again he squinted at my name tag.

“Omar, have I ever told you the joke about the four flies?”
“No Walter, you didn’t” I said, in a gentle voice.

A small smile spread across his face, his blind blue eyes shone. “There were four flies,” he began. “Two boy flies and two girl flies.” I listened patiently to his joke, thinking of his wife Sylvia in the health center. For once I didn’t look at the clock. I was finally doing what I should have been doing all along, waiting for Walter.
Cara Schweitzer

Gifts from a Stranger

A yellow diamond ring of gold. And a white dog so soft to touch it seems it was made of real fur, with a little round tail that rattled every time it moved. Stranger—why did you leave these gifts with me? Why not a note to go along? The only connection between us—father and daughter, two strangers—is a dirty white dog with a broken rattle with a cold ring around its neck.
Kathy Sokol

Friendship and Cheap White Wine

The Chancellor of St. Louis Community College asked me to speak about Jack E. Miller for the grand opening of a facility that was named in his honor. Of course, I said yes. Jack was my hero and mentor, but what do I say about this man in ten short minutes? All kinds of memories began to flood my head. He was a great teacher, author, national speaker, and founder of the Hotel Restaurant Management Program at St. Louis Community College. In addition to his professional qualities Jack was caring, considerate, humorous, supportive, witty, a wonderful husband, father, and grandfather. He had Multiple Sclerosis and used a wheelchair in addition to being a survivor of lung cancer three times. Despite these physical limitations, Jack never used them as an excuse. Jack would say to me often, “Kathy, the way I get through each day is to not believe I have a disability at all.”

As I sat in my office that morning I began to reminisce about Jack. Twenty-two years ago he invited me into his “work family” to teach classes in Hotel Restaurant Management. He greeted me warmly as did Mary and Pat who worked with Jack. Anita, his wife, was also considered part of the group since she was the one who lovingly cared for him. All of us operated as a team, just like members of a successful sports franchise, “Jack’s Pack”, as we were lovingly called by other departments. Shortly after I joined the team Jack shared his vision of training me as his successor as department chair. We both knew retirement was a long time away, but he wanted to make sure when he did retire the St. Louis hospitality industry would know and respect me. So Jack began providing me tremendous support and guidance by introducing me to local restaurateurs, helping me become an advisory board member of the Greater St. Louis Chapter of the Missouri Restaurant Association, and president of a four state chapter of a national professional organization of hospitality educators.

Leaving my office I walked through the building and into the dining room where I saw Jack’s College of Diplomates award. This is an honor that’s bestowed on the best in the industry. Past recipients have been celebrities such as Julia Child, Bill Marriot, and Paul Prudomme to name a few. “Kathy I’m receiving the Academy Award of the Hospitality Industry. I am so excited,” he said. I will never forget that ecstatic look on his face. I think that was the happiest I had ever seen him. Of course “Jack’s Pack” was present at the ceremony in Chicago where over a thousand people attended. We all watched as a ten minute video played describing his accomplishments in the hospitality industry while showing a series of pictures of Jack as a young man maturing into the man he had become. When the video was completed the spotlight fell on Jack and he was given this prestigious award. What a memorable evening! I was so proud of him and felt honored that I was a member of his team.

Jack retired in May 1992. True to his word, I was named head of the department. The day he left his position he shared with me these words of
advice and wisdom: “Kathy do the best you can to run this department. You will never go wrong when you always concentrate on what is best for the students, both personally and professionally. Don’t ever think you are so good that this department can’t run without you. I know that today when I walk out this door you will competently take my place and soon students will say, ‘Jack who?’” And so I adopted his words of advice and made my decisions concerning the department with student success as the ultimate goal. Jack continued teaching one class after retirement and offered advice whenever I would ask and even times when I wouldn’t! My favorite phrase that he shared with me was, “It’s easier to ask forgiveness than permission.” He told me it had served him well over the years and on occasion, I must admit, I used it as well.

Tragically, Jack’s wife was diagnosed with cancer of the lung and died only a few months later. Jack had always been an active man and without Anita not only did he lose his best friend and loving wife, but his ability to be mobile. About the same time Jack lost Anita, I was in the process of a divorce. Jack suggested we go out to dinner every week since. “We have both lost our spouses, of course in totally different circumstances,” he told me. He wasn’t asking for a date, but a way for both of us to get out and not worry about any “boyfriend…girlfriend issues.” When he first suggested our nights out I must admit I was a little concerned. Although I had known Jack for over twenty years we never really interacted without others present. What would we talk about? Despite my hesitation I said yes. That decision turned out to be one of the best in my life. During our first night out we talked about our individual feelings of loss and laughed as we shared stories about our lives. Any sense of hesitation I had about going out with Jack melted away that evening.

I would go to Jack’s home where he had personal assistants who helped him with daily tasks he was unable to do for himself. Upon arriving, I would wheel Jack to the passenger side of his Lincoln, lift him up and place him in the passenger seat of the car. He had instructed me that the best way to lift him was by the waist, which caused a wedgie. As funny as it sounds, it worked! I would then place his wheelchair in the trunk and we would be off for the night’s activities. I learned so much about Jack that I never knew, some fun things and others more serious. Jack always asked servers, “What type of cheap white wine do you have?” That was Jack’s favorite alcoholic beverage. After receiving the dinner menu he directed me to desserts. “Never order dinner until you look at the dessert menu first;” he would say frequently. “Make sure you get to know your students well and keep in touch with them after they graduate, Kathy, because you will be seated instantly and receive excellent service!”

He was right! One night we went to eat at Tony’s, the most expensive restaurant in St. Louis. The owner, Vince Bommarito, greeted us at the door and sat us personally. Jack told me at the dinner table that one of Vince’s children had dropped out of college and had no direction. Jack met and encouraged her to register for classes in the Hotel, Restaurant, Management Program at the college. She listened to his advice and successfully completed her studies. She went on to become catering director at a large hotel in St. Louis. For that, Vince
was forever grateful. That evening, Jack and I never ordered anything, but food kept arriving at our table, first appetizers, main entrée, and a flaming dessert. Vince invited us to visit his well known kitchen as we sipped an after dinner drink. Upon returning to our table Jack asked for the check. Vince’s answer was, “What check?” He walked us out of the restaurant, hailed his valet to retrieve Jack’s car, and upon arrival, helped Jack into the car and personally tipped his employee. Wow, now that’s clout, I thought.

Of course Jack learned a lot about me as well. You see, before Jack and I starting going out I felt that most men were assholes. Of course I did have a few exceptions that included my dad, Jack, and the men in my department. He would listen to my woes concerning the progress of my divorce and offered tremendous support. Once divorced I had a few dates that were disastrous, only confirming my feelings about most men. He told me, “You have had bad luck meeting good men, Kathy, but I promise you there are a lot of them out there.” He encouraged me to give guys another chance. “Try going to a singles group at your church, or join groups that have the same interest as you”, he would say. My answer would be, “Yeah, yeah, yeah.”

Jack and I expanded our outings to an occasional play or event. One night I took him to see Howie Mandel at Westport Playhouse. Jack leaned over to me and said, “Kathy I think I’m the oldest person here.” My answer was, “If you’re the oldest, then I’m the second oldest!” We both enjoyed Howie and spent an evening of laughter that I know was good for the both of us.

During another outing we had arrived at a restaurant, and I attempted to get Jack out of the car. Unfortunately, I was unsuccessful, and Jack fell backwards on the seat. Luckily there was a man who noticed our predicament and helped us. The following week when I picked Jack up there sat a mini-van that had been handicap equipped. Although he never said, I knew he had purchased the van so it would be easier for me to safely transport him to wherever we were going. I was touched by his concern and kindness.

After dinner we would often go shopping. His favorite place to shop was Dillard’s Tommy Hilfiger department. He was always looking for bargains and frequently purchased numerous shirts. Jack had me sign his credit card and we both laughed when the salesperson said, “Thank you Mrs. Miller.” I loved going out with Jack and I know he enjoyed my company as well. We had become great friends and felt very comfortable together. Sometimes I would hear rumors that Jack and I were more than just friends because we were seen so often together. Funny how people react when they see two people out having fun.

Over a period of time I noticed that Jack was losing weight and seemed to be coughing a lot. He went to his doctor and after a number of tests was told that the lung cancer was back. Surgery was not an option. So, my dear friend Jack was dying. Like his bout with Multiple Sclerosis, Jack refused to believe the disease was fatal. He continued teaching at the college even when it was quite obvious he was not well. I remember speaking to him on the phone on a Thursday evening. He just didn’t sound like himself. “Do you want me to come see you?” I asked. “No, but I’ll see you at the college on Monday,” Jack replied.
Although I had never uttered these words before they flowed out of my mouth quite easily that day, “You know, Jack, I love you!” “I love you too, Kathy,” he replied. Saturday morning I received a phone call from his son and was told that Jack had passed away.

So now we were having a Grand Opening and Jack would not be present. Although it was a very happy occasion it was also very sad for me. I wanted Jack to be there for this momentous occasion. Shortly before he died he shared with me that his goal was to teach in the building named after him; unfortunately, he didn’t make it. He never even toured the new facility.

Once again I was faced with the dilemma of writing a ten minute speech about the man I loved, respected, and missed. I wanted the guests to know the Jack I knew and how he had positively affected my life. Sitting at my computer I began reflecting on all my recent thoughts which helped me to begin to write. “Jack Miller was my mentor, my friend. I am sure there are hundreds of people, including many at this celebration today, that feel much the same way. Often I sit in my office and feel his presence still giving me a guiding hand, sometimes I hear his words coming out of my mouth. Finally, I know Jack and his wife Anita are present today in spirit sipping a glass of cheap white wine.”

The Grand Opening took place November 14, 1999, with much celebration. U.S. Representative Lacey Clay in addition to many city and county officials, attended and spoke at the event. My ten minute speech went well, and people laughed when I mentioned the cheap white wine. But what happened several days later was a miracle. I received pictures from the grand opening that were taken by the college photographer. There was a picture of me giving my speech that startled me immediately. I began to stare at it very carefully, using a magnifying glass, and then asking others in my department what they saw. The consensus of the group was that over in the corner in back of me were very distinct angel wings. Not just a reflection of a flash off the window, but true angel wings. One could actually see the outline of the feathers! It made me smile, because it acknowledged to me that Jack and his wife were in attendance that day. God works in mysterious ways, and I know this was his way of letting me know that Jack and Anita were just dropping by to see all the people who had gathered to honor him that day. I wouldn’t be surprised if they weren’t sipping a glass of “cheap white wine!”

Five years later Jack continues to enter my thoughts on a daily basis. I am no longer associated with the program we both loved and am often reminded
of his words of advice concerning my former position “Make your decisions concerning the department with student success as the ultimate goal.” I have never regretted following this guiding principle and try to incorporate it into my present position. Jack’s “College of Diplomates” award no longer hangs in the dining room in the building named after him. Although it bears the likeness of Jack carved in copper along with a list of his accomplishments, it was taken down to make room for other pictures. When I was told by an instructor it was sitting in a closet with no chance of ever being displayed again, I asked Tim Miller, Jack’s son if I could have the award to hang in my office. “Absolutely,” he said. So, today I proudly display his “Academy Award,” and when people ask about the man in the picture I immediately tell them about Jack, the person and educator and what a positive impact he has had on my life along with countless others across the country. I want them walking out of my office not saying, “Jack who?” but “Wow, that Jack was quite a man!”
As I watch the men working across the street on a building that will probably be a bank or another Walgreens, I wonder what color hair they have underneath their yellow construction hats. The fat one is probably balding and most likely he has a drinking problem. The one who is not wearing his hard hat has tattoos on his arms and neck, and I think he is cheating on his girlfriend with the secretary working in the construction trailer. Assuming they don’t see me watching them, I stare for hours at the men and make up stories about their lives. I wish just one of them would notice me sitting here and come over to talk. I have always had a thing for men in uniform.
Alissa Slyman

Killing an Angel

His eyes said
It’s time.

As he unbuttoned
his pants,
all that was on my mind
was what my dad’s
reaction would be.

It only made me
want this more.

His sweaty hands
fumbled over
my uneasy stomach.

I noticed the crumpled
sheets from my bed on the floor.

I felt his hands brush
over my small breasts.

And I wondered if he knew
that he was killing an angel.

I could stop now and fly away
or continue on
and fall.
Dan Veraldi

Middletown, New York

Many of my childhood days were spent in the company of my uncle
Listening to his stories, horrors of a railroad switchman—
The arm had not been cut clean, but mangled, crimson and raw.
I remember bouncing on his knee, the stump in the small of my back,
Resting in the shadows of his garden.
And every Spring I’d help him till the New York soil.

What we grew there fed the whole neighborhood.
Italian widows would come when the reds were ripe,
And that’s how we knew our tomatoes were ready to pick—
When those forever-mourning ladies came to lighten our loads,
My uncle would pour them wine while I went outside
With strange burlap bags, running among the fruit.
I picked only the best, passing over yellow and green,
And held the ripe so softly, like slippery soap.

Always dressed in black the widows came
Marveling the colors of our labor.
Que bello, their breath smelling like communion through crooked yellow.
Gratzie, I’d repeat until the widows left
Straight armed with heavy bags
Curved spines with heavy age.
Nathan Want

Locked Out

The first time I walked the picket line in front of Schnucks, I was nervous. As soon as I stepped on the sidewalk next to the swooshing of cars whizzing past me on Manchester Road, I felt exposed and vulnerable. Almost immediately after I hung the “locked out” sign around my neck like a gaudy reprint of an oil painting by a starving artist, I heard someone yell, “Go back to work.” I wondered if I would be able to take four hours of this.

After several minutes, I asked someone from the grocery department whether or not they ever felt exposed out here.

He just stared at me blankly.

“Do you ever feel, like, naked out here?” I asked.

“Not really,” he replied slowly as his eyes jittered nervously from the traffic and me.

“I think I’ll go down to the other curb to see who else is here,” I said after awhile, feeling a bit awkward.

At the other curb was a guy named Tom from Customer Service. Shortly after greeting each other, Tom started rambling about sports news. I normally loathe any kind of sports talk, but listening to him helped calm my strange uneasiness of being out in the open and feeling on display.

Later we started talking about the situation of Schnucks and the strike. For the most part, I asked questions and Tom would reply. Both seemed like the perfect role for us: I didn’t feel like saying much, and I had always thought of Tom as being the type of person who likes to dominate conversation.

Everyone on the picket line swayed his or her arms in mechanical waves. Their plastic smiles reminded me of wax lips. A few bagger and checker girls were at one end of the sidewalk, listening to Gangsta Rap out of an old boom box. With their faces away from the traffic, they shook their asses in sync with the bass line.

I found myself wondering if this was some new form of prostitution, except they’re selling themselves for honks, waves and hollers.

I decided to face my fears and focus on the sports cars, luxury cars, economy cars, motorcycles, mopeds, semis, ice cream trucks, mail trucks, trucks and emergency vehicles streaming past me at about forty five miles per hour.

I started looking inside the windshields, briefly noticing men and women of all types of ages, skin tones, hair colors and lengths, and styles of facial hair.

I heard almost every horn imaginable. There were the squeals of compact foreign cars and the more abrasive beeps of American sedans. The nasal-like blows from garbage trucks shook my body. The short bursts of ambulance sirens reminded me of R2-D2. Some kids blared an air horn that was mounted on the top of their Toyota Corolla, activated by someone’s hand coming out of the sunroof.
Soon, I began to concentrate on making eye contact with as many people as possible. About half of the people seemed either deep in thought or completely devoid of any sort of conscious brain activity. Some were in mid-conversation with other people in the car. At first, I paid the most attention to these people. Getting a glimpse into someone else's life without them noticing made me feel at ease.

I didn't really know how to respond to the people passing by. Mostly, I just waved, but then I began to notice the variety of non-verbal communication the motorists directed to me; so I felt as though I should respond accordingly.

The most common gesture was the wave which consists of loosening your grip off the steering wheel and stretching out your hand so only the tips of your fingers can be seen through the windshield. I wondered if these people didn't like to divert a lot of attention to them self. I would respond with a hearty wave, letting them know their wave was acknowledged and appreciated.

Then there were the enthusiastic thumbs-up from middle-aged men in cars with seductive names, like Lexus, and “smartly inquisitive” names, like Infiniti. I thought these people must work in cubicles, hate their jobs and their bosses and vicariously experience our protest of corporate power. I designated waves to these guys with a slow left to right motion with my hand and a slight head-tilt downwards to try and express sympathy and understanding.

Occasionally, there were the people who, slightly, yet firmly, raised their fists. I called this the “The International Sign for ‘Fight the Power.” I usually gave these people a thumbs-up, because I felt they deserved more than a wave.

And then there was my favorite, the two-fingered peace sign. When someone gave me one of these, I pretended I was a protester from the ‘60s. I imagined we were fighting a revolution, and we would not be silenced.

I started to really enjoy myself. I somehow felt closer to these people, many of whom I didn’t recognize, for this very brief, yet powerful moment. I began to wave vigorously and step closer to the curb.

Some people seemed to respond to this. Their hands extended toward the passenger window and my hand would extend to their car, as though we were trying to touch each other. I began to feel a strong sense of community and belonging with these complete strangers.

Of course, not everyone was giving positive feedback back. I would
receive the occasional thumbs-down from adults, and sometimes from their children. There were taunts, most of which couldn't be clearly understood.

And then there was the rare middle finger. But I sort of became immune to these after awhile. In fact, it made me wave harder. And not out of anger, either. I seemed to smile without even trying. In comparison to the positive gestures, the negative ones seemed weak and petty. They almost seemed ridiculous. Sticks and stones may break my bones, but your finger will never hurt me.

Once I finished my shift and started driving home, I noticed that my eyes were still drawn to people inside the cars of the oncoming traffic. I had to make a conscious effort to focus on my driving.

The second time I walked the picket line, I picked up a locked-out sign with a two-by-four attached to the back and, with the exception of lighting a cigarette or using the bathroom in Lion's Choice, raised it high for four hours, trying to ignore my sore arms.
Dan Veraldi

The stumbling drunk sings as if no one can hear him

Ugly beautiful
like the asylumed stranger who insists she is your mother
like the bloody sheets of the virgin's wedding bed
like the tears of a rape victim that no one will see—her silent shame
like the cries of the newborn infant cast out from the bleeding mother
Ugly beautiful
like the prayers of the child who has not yet come to question Christ
like the martyr's bones still sacred and revered
like the song of a slave
like the fallen statue of Stalin behind a fallen wall
Ugly beautiful like the tattoo of the holocaust survivor
like the brand on cattle hide
like the decorative cuttings in the African's face
like the scars that bring back childhood memories
like the mangled teddy bear now packed in a box
Ugly beautiful like the knees of the wheel-chaired veteran
suspended above loose change
like the stumbling drunk that sings as if no one can hear him
like the black boys on the stoop in front of a boarded doorway
like the polluted sunsets against city skylines
Ugly beautiful
like the rows of tombstone on rolling hills that yield no more space
like the corpse of a nameless man laid out for his country
like the brave rebel on galley trap door
Ugly beautiful
like the final poetry on the suicide note
Dan Veraldi

Why we dress with our backs toward each other

Fumbling for my clothes,
I wondered if I make love like I move through darkness.
The door opens.
Light splits the black silence in two.

And so I cannot hide my weakness in the shadow
But stand facing her—alarmed
Propped against the frosted metal bedpost
Wishing I had more clothes to bury myself under.
Laura Walker

Under the Bed

The waves of summer night heat
Slithered like a snake into my bedroom window.
I curled my small body against the pink sheets—
Pillows and stuffed animals surrounded me.

The memories of the day
Floated in circles around my mind—
Barbies fought and made up,
Scraped knees from the tree Earl,
And all the milk I gulped greedily.

I twisted my legs into a pretzel,
Needing release but crippled with fear.
My eyes shot open with frustration,
The sour and bitter smell of my sweat thizzled my nose.
I could no longer bear the frustration.

My voice quivered,
Squeaking as I whispered to fear,
Trying to negotiate the longevity of my life.
The smell of rot and green beans curdled my stomach.

Legs pushed my little body toward the sky.
There I stood, the pain almost paralyzing me.
The sheets gathered and bunched under my feet,
Animals crawled toward me for security.

Slowly bending my knees,
Ready to hurdle my fear and run for safety.
My legs pushed and propelled me through the air.
Socks sliding on the pink carpet,
Toward the evil, my hands clutching me first.

Returning to my feet, I ran as fast as my tan
Little legs could carry me,
Into the bathroom, shielded by the light.
Slamming my back against the door.
Tomorrow I would put the mattresses on the floor.
Nathan Want

The Shortcut

Edward’s white t-shirt had almost completely turned dark crimson. Most of the blood was not his. Liam was ahead of him, in spite of his limp. Edward’s head was spinning.

Liam stopped abruptly and craned his neck to his right, down the dark crevice of a building. His face was illuminated by the glow of a street lamp. Edward continued to run at the same pace, but now he was quickly catching up to Liam. As he approached him, Edward caught a glimpse of Liam’s eyes, widened with fear. Edward seldom saw Liam scared, and as soon as he saw his eyes, his heart sank.

“Here,” Liam gasped. Without looking, he stuck his fist out toward Edward’s chest. For a second, Edward thought Liam was going to strike him, but instead, he grabbed his bloody shirt and yanked him into a narrow alleyway.

Edward’s foot kicked an empty bottle. It quickly spun under a dumpster and then shattered. Liam stopped running, stuck out his elbow, and leaned against the side of a building. Edward passed Liam, then turned around and faced him. “Liam, we have to go back,” he said.

Liam looked Edward up and down. “What are you doing?” he huffed.
“What?” Edward wheezed.
“Why are you still wearing that?”
Edward looked down at his own chest and saw the bloody shirt.

*

Edward’s memory of the accident occurred in still moments, like snapshots. The red convertible through his windshield. The red convertible’s front end crumpled into the telephone pole. The silhouette of the woman’s head leaning against the driver’s side window.

Edward met eyes with Liam. “What am I supposed to do with it?” he said.
“I dunno, but you can’t just walk around like that.”
Edward crossed his arms over his chest and grabbed the bottom of his shirt. As he started to lift it over his head, he realized how hard he was panting.
“What are you doing?” Liam squeaked.
“I’m taking it off. You’re right. What if someone sees me?”
“What are you going to do with it? You can’t just leave evidence lying around.”

The word evidence rang throughout Edward’s mind.
When Edward pulled the woman out of the convertible, he was completely dazed. He felt as though his spirit and body had disconnected in the crash. His body seemed to be pulling the woman from the wreckage on its
own accord.

After Edward had pulled her out, he looked at the woman’s limp body. Liam was saying something, but he didn’t notice. The woman’s chest was rising and sinking quickly, and her fingers were curled slightly. There was a lot of blood. Edward couldn’t find its source. It was if she was a sponge and an invisible hand was squeezing the liquid out of her. Liam was now yelling something. A gurgling sound came from the woman’s throat. Her eyes were full of shock and pain.

“The fuck you doing?” Liam’s voice finally entered Edward’s consciousness.

“Huh?” he said. For a second, Edward had forgotten where he was. He looked around. When he saw Liam, he was already a block away, running. Edward looked at the woman, and then to Liam, now about a block and a half away. His leg only bent slightly, and he swung it to the side, almost in circular motions.

Headlights suddenly engulfed Edward’s body. As he looked up, all he could see was the car’s two bright, penetrating lights. He heard a car door open and a deep voice said, “Jesus, are you alright?”

Edward’s heart seemed like it would burst out of his chest. Without thinking, he dropped the woman’s body and started running, retracing Liam’s steps.

Edward could hear sirens squealing in the distance. Liam looked at the wall to his left, as if he could see the police car through the building.

“Forget it,” he said. “We have to keep moving.”

Edward pulled down the shirt and they started running again. After running about a mile, Liam ducked behind a dumpster. Edward followed him and sat down, leaning against the wall. The alley smelled of mold and urine. They both tried desperately to catch their breath.

“You really fucked up this time,” Liam finally said. “I told you not to take that turn. That road’s always busy.”

“We have to go back,” Edward said.

“What?”

“We have to go back.”

“Are you fuckin’ kidding?”

“No. What if she dies?”

“Yeah, what if she dies? Not only will we be pinned with armed robbery, we’ll be in jail for life for murder.”

“Murder,” Edward thought. “I’m a murderer.”

“We have to go back,” Edward insisted.

“No! Just drop it. That’s not even an option. Fuck! Three-hundred measly bucks for this.” He banged his head against the brick wall.

They sat in silence for a couple of minutes. Edward could hear a deep rumble from a truck on the street next to them.

“I’m going back,” Edward said.

“Shut up. I’m trying to think.”

They sat a while longer. Edward thought again about how the woman
looked in his arms, blood flowing out of her like a spring. Flowing on the asphalt. He looked at his shirt.

“"I have to go back, Liam." Edward was now standing.

Liam looked up at him. “Where are you going?”

“I can’t go through with this. I need to make sure she’s alive.”

“Are you insane? The cops will be all over you.”

“It doesn’t matter. I have to know.”

“If she is dead, they’ll arrest you for murder, man!”

“If I don’t go back, I will be a murderer. In my head, I’ll be a murderer. I might as well have died in the car accident, too.”

They looked at each other for a moment. Edward felt like he was going to cry.

“What about me, huh?” Liam said as he stood up. “What am I supposed to do?”

“Give me the money. I’ll take the heat. You’ll be home free.”

Liam looked down and shook his head. There was a moment of silence and then he looked back to Edward. “You sure about this, man?”

Edward looked Liam dead in the eyes. “Yeah,” he said. “Give me the money.”

Liam stared at Edward.

“I have to do this. I have to go now,” Edward said.

Liam fished in his pocket, pulled out a wad of twenties, and handed them to Edward. “Well, I guess this is the end,” Liam said. “God, this is so fucked up. If we had just…”

“Shut up,” Edward interrupted. “I have to go. I’ll be fine and so will you.”

Then he hugged Liam.

Liam started to cry.

Edward’s eyes started to water. Then he remembered the bloody shirt. He quickly pulled away, and looked at Liam’s chest. There was no blood. He glanced down at his shirt. The blood had dried. Liam wiped his face with the back of his hand. Edward turned and started running the way they had come. He could still feel Liam’s eyes watching him. He felt like shit, but he knew it had to be this way.

When Edward returned to the accident, his car was gone, and there were three police cars in its place. A tow truck was lifting the convertible from the telephone pole. Edward spotted two policemen standing to his left, talking. One had his arms crossed. The other was smoking a cigarette. As he approached them he said, “Excuse me.” They stopped talking and look toward his direction. Then they looked at his shirt, then at his face.

“How is she?”
Leah Weber

Sometimes our Arms are too Short

Living with my single father was never easy. He rarely remembered my age or birthday, and my school events were an unknown concept that he did not have enough spare time to join in on. It was even harder knowing that my mother, also my best friend was so far away.

I envied friends whose divorced parents were streets, towns, cities, and even states away. But I was not so fortunate. I had chosen to keep my American citizenship and high school diploma over my mother. This meant leaving her behind in Denmark when I was fifteen to go live with my father in St. Louis, Missouri.

My mother and I did everything together in the past. We were mentors to each other and learned from each other’s mistakes as well as our triumphs. Together we became vegetarians, but she was always the better one at making veggie burgers.

I confessed my drinking splurges with her but on some occasions it was not necessary because we would share the occasional drink or two together. I informed her of the boyfriend who took my virginity; she then told me about her first. We laughed, cried, disagreed, argued, and made up together. I dyed her hair with the latest colors in fashion after I would explain how many inches I wanted cut from my locks. She was my nurse when I had the flu or when I was in the hospital having surgery.

We borrowed clothes and complained about why I had bigger boobs than she, why my hips were bigger too, not to mention I was three inches taller. We shopped for makeup, shoes and what we should have for dinner. She always cooked because we didn’t want the risk of me setting the house on fire. No one makes better potato salad than my mom, that’s the truth.

We took trips together exploring Italy, England, Germany, and the Czech Republic. We almost got arrested together in Prague for not stamping our metro tickets. After paying my fine with the rest of our money, I screamed at the Czech men for even considering handcuffing my mother. Within a few minutes, I had convinced the two officers through yelling, crying, and a great deal of American cuss words, to let her go. I don’t know if they based their decision on love for my mother or if they just thought I was a crazy American who they wanted to shut up. We played board games and cards late at night or on the train to our next vacation destination.

We always spoke English to each other, and deep down inside I knew that she was more American than Danish, no matter what her passport said. Yet when the time came for me to return to my native country, she stayed behind in hers.

Leaving my friends, grandparents, school, and the best friend to me of all was a challenging decision, but my mother encouraged me to follow my dreams and return to the country I had longed to become part of again. For the
next three years we talked on the phone, sent postcards, packages, and letters. We included pictures of ourselves reveling in our new looks and photos of our surroundings, homes, and neighborhoods. She informed me of her new younger boyfriend. I was proud of her for moving on after my parent’s tough divorce and was amused by how a fifty-year-old woman could look so damn good to a man ten years younger than she.

I called her collect in the middle of the night crying to her about my father’s ignorance to his own daughter. We shared tears over the phone when my seventeen-year-old cat died. Besides my mother, Alfie was my best friend. But there were times when telephones and letters could not make up for her absence.

I went to prom three years in a row yet never had the privilege of going dress shopping with her. When nominated for "Snowball Queen," it was not my mother who put on my corsage. My mother never viewed the chorus concerts I participated in or visited one of the many German competitions I had practiced months for. I had no one to help me with my hangovers or sew my clothing. She was not the one who taught me to drive nor did she get to sit in my first car. She was not there to hug when I received acceptance to the school paper, and her shoulder was absent when I needed to cry after being dumped by my latest love. My only resource was to call her, and we would agree that men suck.

But it was the most important day that I was able to share with my mother that made up for our lost time. I walked down the high school track then on to the football field wearing my freshly pressed gown and my royal blue cap. At that moment I did not care about where I would be attending college that fall, or who I would never see again from the class of 2003. The diploma I would soon be receiving was only a piece of paper and the fireworks only grasped my attention for a split second. I paid little attention to whom I sat by or who screamed my name when on stage. It was knowing that my mother was sitting on the bleachers in the audience of my high school graduation that made this event so rewarding. Once the ceremony was over, I was able to wrap my arms around my mother, maker, and best friend, and for the first time in three years, she was not out of reach.
Leah Weber

Fifth Gear after Sixteen Years

The rattling of worn exhaust systems and broken down motor mounts are my daily alarm clock. Sometimes my father begins his usual car repair habit at seven in the morning. On other occasions, when his sleeping routine is not so dependable, he might rev up one of his engines at four a.m.

The first few months after my mother’s death eleven years ago, he would stay up all night and work on his lovely beasts. Besides my mother, his only true love was cars. I was just an unexpected bonus. All his life he dreamed of owning a 1969 Shelby Cobra, so when I was born he convinced my mother that the most loving name that they could bless their baby daughter with was, of course, Shelby. The only difference was that I didn’t come with a 5.0.

“How was school?” he always asked this after my arrival from school.

“Good. I ate some weird stuff at school today. I think it was dog food, maybe it was venom infested snake flesh that the lunch ladies plan on using to eliminate the Gastons High population,” was my smart-alecky comment.

“That’s great Shelbs.” This was his response to everything I said.

“How was your day?” I asked only to be polite.

“Well it took me about half an hour to find the freakin’ leak in this radiator, but she’s doing good now. I got her all cleaned up. I’m still trying to get in touch with Mercedes to get a damn grill for that 380 SL…..”

Halfway through his car talk mumble jumble, I sneaked off to my room where I continued to prepare for my life threatening test which awaited me in my chemistry lab the next morning.

“Shelbs, you want some potatoes?” He hollered above to my attic room around nine o’clock in the evening.

“Nah, I’m good,” was the nicest way that I could turn down his halfway cooked whipped potato concoction.

He never mastered the ability to cook while mom was around, probably because mom was always the one cooking. On evenings when my homework pile did not soar to a great abundance on my desk, I took the time to prepare an edible nibble for the both of us. The thought of my grease monkey father preparing some unknown creation with his oil filth fingers made the school cafeteria food seem appealing.

Yet, at times, it was amusing watching my short father leap around the kitchen in his twenty-year-old soiled mechanic suit extinguishing fires. I was always afraid of my long sandy-brown hair going up in flames, but my father had no worries in that area. His hair was eliminated around the same time I was born. It must have been stress.

After about twenty minutes of fire alarms beeping throughout the house, my old pops turned to me with a goofy grin, drenched in sweat and said, “Chinese is good, yeah, can’t go wrong with rice.”

We loaded up into one of his prized muscle cars then ventured off to
Chinese Express and indulged ourselves with sweet and sour chicken, duck and those crunchy water chestnuts mixed in soy sauce. From time to time, I wondered if he purposely burned the food just to have an excuse to take a joy ride in his SS. I was never fooled by his pretend notion of being lost. He just liked taking the long way; it gave him peace to hear the roaring sound of his engine purr. Nothing else made him free from life's everyday burdens. His head would be clear and his thoughts would be focused on my mother. I spotted him gazing away from the road a couple times to acknowledge a wallet size photo situated on his dash. It was his favorite picture, the photo from my parent’s wedding.

I remember the first time he pointed it out to me. I was ten. With a wrinkled forehead and a wise-man-look upon his face he turned to me and said, “A man never realizes how stupid he looks until he’s next to a beautiful woman like your mother. I wish someone would have told me sooner.” Nothing more was said after that. He just turned back around and continued driving. The only thing that we could both relate to were those lonely nights spent missing my mother. I talked to her sometimes and I’ve overheard him doing the same.

While anticipating a green light on our joyride, I noticed my father popping his knuckles underneath the steering wheel. It was then that I remembered mom doing the same when I was little. We never talked about her. I don’t really know why, I assume it was because my father was born with the stubborn gene. He has always been very stubborn with his ways and won’t show any emotion unless it is cursing at the neighborhood dogs. He likes dogs; he just needs something to curse at every now and then.

“Did you and mom ever work on the cars together?” I asked him on our way home while sniffing the flavorful aroma of crab rangoon in the air.

“Nope. Never did. Your mom was never a true car-fanatic like me.”

We pulled into the dirt driveway as my father maneuvered the car around his mini junkyard before parking. While grabbing the brown paper bags of our favorite Chinese delights from the backseat my father told me something I never knew.

“She used to take you for long bike rides to the park and feed the ducks. You two rode your bikes everywhere. And before you knew how to ride a bike she would strap you to the back of the baby seat. Your mother rode her bike everywhere. She never learned how to drive a car.”

I was frozen with shock from the information that had been transported into my brain. My mouth was stuck in an oddly half open half crooked position. My tongue was anxious to create thousands of words into several different questions that I had for my father to answer. But at that moment I was stuck. Not just my mouth but also my whole body. I felt like an innocent prisoner who had been locked up with a mime for decades only to find out that my cellmate was anything but speechless. I held our twenty-dollar supper in my hands as
my father stepped carefully out from his seat, pulling both knees to his waist, then landing his feet on the filthy ground two feet or more from the car door to avoid contact with the its glossy paint.

I stood motionless as I watched from the corner of my eye my father checking his reflection through the amber gold metallic hood. With his blistered fingers he pulled the sleeve of his worn turtle neck over the palm of his hand then in a circular motion removed a spot above the driver’s side front wheel. He smiled in pride then walked towards the backdoor anxious to devour his pot stickers and a cold Foster's beer.

"Why?" was the only sound that I could squeal from my lips.

"Taking twelve mile biking trips was your mother's passion. Why drive when you can ride was her motto."

"Why didn't you ever tell me this?" I questioned in astonishment.

He said nothing, just shrugged his shoulders a little and began eating his fried rice. I grabbed a plate from the far left cabinet, then began sampling the Chinese dishes from the white and red cartons scattered across the cluttered kitchen counter. We said nothing during dinner in fact we barely even looked at each other. After I had consumed my meal and had a full belly to last a week, I removed myself from the kitchen table to wash my plate. Without my even knowing my father had left the kitchen and returned with a small photograph in his hand.

"Shelbs, come here," he said, waving his arm, signaling for me to come sit down beside him. He handed me a picture of a teal green Corvette Sting Ray. It was beautiful. The chrome shined like a freshly cut diamond and the wheels were black like night. I never had the same love for cars as my father, but I did not have to be an automotive expert to appreciate this vehicle.

"She's nice," I stated quietly

"I only had her for about six months, maybe eight, tops."

I was prepared to ask why but the sad look on my father’s face revealed that my question would soon be answered.

"I sold her right after your mother died. I needed money for the funeral and I wanted to be able to have more time."

"Time?" I questioned out of confusion.

"I was always too busy with the cars and not busy enough with your mother. I sold it so that I would spend more time with you," he explained. Until that moment I had always assumed that the devotion to his cars was my father’s way of coping. His car fetish was not a hobby but more of a refuge; at least that is what I had thought.

"My biggest regret when your mother died was not taking enough time away from my work to be with her. I had often thought about teaching her to drive, but never once did I ask if she was interested." For a few odd seconds we stared at each other, reading the other’s thoughts. He gave a fake smile and said, "I don't ever want you to feel like you can't talk to me. Okay?"

I responded with a genuine smile and a reassuring nod. Never before would I have thought that what my father was in need of was exactly what I had
for so long wanted as well.

Three weeks later, I awakened, not by squeaky car jacks but by my father nudging my shoulder encouraging me to get up immediately. It was my sixteenth birthday, and he insisted that every sixteen-year-old should acquire the skill of driving. With very little strength in my eyelids, I dragged my heels to the fuel reeking garage and unlocked the door to my father’s Mach 1. Before I could land myself on the slick leather interior, he snatched the keys from my hand and insisted on driving to a flat parking lot.

“How am I going to learn if you won’t let me drive?” I questioned while half asleep.

“Patience, you will have your turn.” He replied.

“You don’t trust me?” I asked in a deceiving voice.

“Trust a woman driver, maybe. But, not on that hill. Believe me, a flat parking lot will be a lot easier and better for the car.”

Once we had reached our destination, I anxiously switched seats with my father. I had been told of the shifting procedure before and was ready to conquer the talent that my father had also learned. Foot on the clutch, shift into first slowly, let go of the clutch and begin to accelerate. My neck swung forwards then back. The car jerked in a way that gave it the appearance of having a seizure.

My father’s Mustang came to a stop before I glanced to the passenger side only to see a grin on his face. Why was he smiling? I killed it. What was so great about that? I restarted the car and concentrated on my father’s advice. In between jolts, grinds, and burnouts I would peer next to me and made eye contact with my father. After succeeding in rolling down the parking lot in first gear I shifted to second, then third.

At that moment my father grinned and said, “You’re not quite a manual pro, but you’ll get there.”

That was my sixteenth birthday present. Not something most girls would ask for, but instead of a cake or a new wardrobe, this gift would never be devoured or out-grown.
Nathan Want

After Missouri

Angelic clouds avoid crippled hands
Twisting tightly
Around the clear blue sky
Under a sparrow's flight.

The quiet violence of the summer sun
Melts seeping black tar.

The moon creeps over ashen rooftops, a silver dollar shimmering
In the salted sky.
I tell its time while I wait to be found.

A train's whistle moans in the distance like a mechanical lullaby,
Singing a mournful song to the sleeping city.

A homeless man bears his burden
Through ominous alleyways.
Nathan Want

Dark Funnels

A baby is
Born in the blackness
Of her mother’s womb.

Black is enigmatic, such as the
Gaping mouth of a
Tropical fish.

Black is the coffee
Sitting in my cup, and black is the color
Of my lungs.

A cancerous tumor,
Gangrenous limbs,
The black
Stench of death.

Black holes devour like
Ravenous amoebas.

To a blind man,
Black is the color of
Existence.
Leah Weber

I Want to Go Home

I don’t know where my life began.
I might,
But memory is not a quality of mine.
I don’t know what home is,
If it is:
A white picket fence,
An old sand infested door mat with faded writing,
The apple tree in the backyard
Which blossoms have not risen from
Since the sorrowful age of
Twelve.
I think that is how old I was
When I lost my home.

It was placed inside my wallet
In between dead receipts and business cards.
I must have lost my wallet that morning.
Or maybe it lies in your pocket oceans away.
If only I could remember where I misplaced it
Then maybe I could find you.

Inside my home sits
A family eating mashed potatoes and green bean casserole,
While the orange striped tabby meows for more fancy feast.

Maybe I was
Eleven
When I lost my home.
My memory remains unstable.
Was that the age?
Do you remember?
Mommy—
Are you there?

If only dead apple trees could talk.
No, it was cherry.
Leah Weber

Rolkiilde Festival 2000

Blood seeps through the deserted ground.
The stench of fermented barley still lingers.
She weeps over her loss
Trampled bodies
All seven
Lie
By the stage.
They are removed
In black
bags
Along with the two corpses
from overdoses.
The bags vanish and so do the tents.
All except for the ones which cannot be claimed
By their dead owners.
Pitched in deserted soil and matted grass
They remain.
Alone.
No one to take them home.
No one to tear them down.
They are abandoned
Like street orphans in dumpsters.

She mourns
As orphans still exist.
And the tents wait with her
To see
If their loved one
Was one
Of those nine.
Contributors

Cecilia Barresi studies art and French. She enjoys the luxury of education.

Penn Boon is a film major who spends his free time playing the guitar.

Michael Cobb is going to major in culinary arts. He likes to play basketball and spends most of his time with his daughter.

Katie Croker holds a BA in English Literature and another BA in Religious Studies from Webster University. She plans on becoming an ESOL teacher.

Elaine Shaefer Davis enjoys creative writing.

Paul Drago is without a solid area of study.

Christopher Fisher works full-time as a paralegal. He is working towards a degree in Health Care Management.

Laura Hazan hopes to publish a novel. Meanwhile, she'll keep writing and making lasagna.

Nahid Izadpanah is a design major. She loves people, travelling, art, and poetry.

Corrie Jekel attends both Meramec and Webster University. She is working toward a degree in English and enjoys photography and attending concerts.

Elizabeth LaRue is a general transfer student at Meramec. She is interested in psychology and writing.

Charles Meyer lives in St. Louis and attends Meramec.

Ally McWilliams has been writing for years but has never been published. She lives with her cat.

Amber Morris is a general transfer student at Meramec. She likes drawing and creative writing.

Krista Pohl lives with her daughter, her boyfriend, and eighteen pets. She enjoys writing and hanging out with her family.
Bridget Ryder is majoring in foreign languages. She enjoys figure skating, reading, and telling funny stories of her four years in a convent.

Cara Schweitzer is a second year student at Meramec, majoring in Marine Biology. She hopes to be a shark scientist.

Alissa Slyman is studying to become a high school English teacher. She enjoys writing, painting, and cooking.

Kathy Sokol attends Meramec.

Dan Veraldi is a third year student at Meramec and a wrestling coach at St. Louis Priory High School. At Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania he helped to start a small student literary magazine called The Bullet.

Laura Walker is an English major. She loves theatre.

Nathan Want has been going to Meramec almost as long as he spent in high school. He looks forward to expanding his horizons.

Leah Weber enjoys rock climbing, fishing, writing, and running; and has a passion for muscle cars. She loves her family and her close friends.
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